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A SISTER'S CRIME; OR, WHICH LOVED HIM BEST?

BY AGNES MARY SHELTON,

AUTHOR OF "A BITTER MISTAKE," "FOR THE WOMAN HE LOVED," ETC., ETC.



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CHAPTER I.

THEY WERE TWO DAUGHTERS OF ONE RACE.

"OH, dear, I hate these lonely evenings! Don't you, Irene?"

"Then papa is not able to join us," said Irene, looking wistfully at an empty chair she had drawn to its old familiar place.

They were sisters, those two girls, as unlike in disposition as they were in appearance, yet each lovely in her way. Maud, the elder, was the more beautiful, of the classic type; the other, impetuous, warm-hearted, faulty Irene, was altogether a type of her own.

The room was spacious and luxurious; the lavish hand of wealth had made life smooth for each; they basked in Fortune's sunshine, its only cloud, which had shifted not far out of sight, to mingle with the shadows of the past, was their mother's death. Maud seldom missed her; but Irene had never ceased to feel the aching void, even when the tender love of her father strove to fill it.

And now that father, whose every mood she studied, could not come to that meal, which he liked best because it brought the sweet home atmosphere more about him than any other.

Irene rose from her crouching position on the sofa-rug, where she had been reading by the firelight, her soul-lit face paling, and her dark hair escaping from its fastenings.

"I know you hate to take tea alone with me, Maud, dear," she continued, still looking at the seat her father usually occupied, "and it is lonely for you; but I am quite sure some one will call by-and-by, and then you can spare me to papa. Can't you, Maudy?"

"I don't know who you mean by some one, Irene, and I don't think father is at all in need of either of us."

"Some one means Captain Creswick, and I think papa would like me to chat or read to him. May I, Maudy, or would you be afraid to be left without a chaperon?"

"I never interfere with you, child," returned the stately Maud, repressing a smile, for "the child" had assumed a grave dignity, and looked for an instant so terrible that it was impossible not to be drawn into her moods, which were as variable as they were startling.

But those moods were not at all times comprehensible to her sister.

"Interfere is not the word, Maudy. You know I would like to please you in all things, and I do please you sometimes, don't I?"

"Of course you do; but you are so often wayward and capricious."

"I wish I could be otherwise, then. I try hard to change myself, but always fail. Every one has a nature of her own, I suppose, and as I had not the chance of casting my own flesh and blood into a perfect mold, the way you can turn out that lovely shape of jelly, Maud, I don't think I should be altogether responsible for my shortcomings. By the way, that same jelly is so tempting, I shall have a morsel if you will kindly help me."

Miss Emerson, serenely ignoring what she did not understand, drew the table nearer the fire, and after taking her place at it, ruthlessly drove a spoon into the very heart of the coveted dainty.

"Papa told me he was quite able to come down-stairs this evening," replied Irene, with an anxious expression on her young face.

"He thought so; but a violent fit of coughing left him so exhausted that he sent word not to wait for him."

"Why did you not tell me this before?"

"You were rambling, as usual, out of doors when the message came."

"But I have been in ever so long, and expecting him. I do feel disappointed, Maudy, dear, and—just let me run up for one second."

"Stay! you are too impulsive. You would only disturb him now."

"He must be weak indeed, or he would have joined us; he delights in your little tea-table, you always please him with such elegant devices to tempt the appetite. Poor papa, how I should love to see him eat up a thick slice of bread, like one of his workingmen. I do believe it would be the grandest sight to me I ever saw."

"What are you talking about? A grand sight to see our father such a savage!"

"Yes, Maudy; but, as I was saying, you know how he loves our pleasant little evenings, and it is as great a privation for him not to be with us, as for us to do without him. So, if you don't mind I shall go to him as soon as you will spare me."

"You are not eating your jelly."

"I shall have some tea first." And Irene, curbing her impatience to escape from her sister's thralldom, simply because she longed to be beside the invalid who was dearer to her than all the world, took her place at the table and lifted the dainty cup to her lips. "It is pleasant," she remarked, "to look around this big room and feel oneself so nice and warm before the fire, is it not, Maudy? And then to look at Ponsey curled up like a white ball before it. Ah! you dear old dog. I should like to roll myself up like you and bask in the fire-light."

Following the bent of her inclinations, the girl threw herself beside the dog, who stood up to wag his tail the moment he heard his name; but Ponsey was not so easily deceived; he adored his young mistress, and although he neither saw or felt a tear on his woolly coat, he detected something in her look and voice which made him lay his head quietly on her lap and look wistfully up at her.

"Will you never be anything better than a child, Irene?" asked Maud. "Ponsey has more sense than you. Come, have your tea like a reasonable mortal, if you can."

But it was evident that poor Irene could not do anything in reason this evening; her tea was too strong, her toast tasteless, and she pushed aside her cup just as the door opened to admit Captain Creswick.

A welcome guest was this young gentleman, although the sisters were not very demonstrative in showing it, particularly Maud, whose manner became somewhat restrained; while Irene's, although affable enough, lost some of its former freedom.

Francis Creswick, frank, manly and sincere, a general favorite, and courted in the highest circles of society, was proud, reserved and haughty, sometimes satirical, but never severe or arrogant.

"I quite expected to see Major Emerson this evening," he said, after the usual greeting, "and have brought the books I promised him. I am also the bearer of a message from Mrs. Huntley. She proposes changing charades for a regular comedy, in which she requests your valuable aid, Miss Emerson."

"I fear my aid would not be very valuable; Mrs. Huntley knows I have no taste for acting."

"You were splendid in the *tableaux vivants* on Thursday night."

"I had not to speak. Irene can remember a speech, be it ever so long. It is too much trouble for me. I suppose Mrs. Huntley has enlisted you in her service?"

"Unfortunately for me, any plan of that kind is impossible. My regiment has been ordered West, and we start two weeks from today. The intervening time will be only too filled up. I should not have been here this evening only that I wished to say farewell in case accident prevented me from seeing you again—I could not leave without that, you know. I start for my father's place by the

last train to-night, where I shall spend a week, and then duty claims me."

A cold feeling crept over the heart of Maud as the young man announced this last unwelcome tidings; but not the faintest trace of emotion was betrayed by her manner or appearance. Not so Irene. It was fortunate for her that they were too much occupied with their conversation to notice the crimson that dyed her cheeks, while her lips quivered like a grieved child's.

Neither sister would acknowledge even to her own heart that she loved Francis Creswick, yet both knew it.

Maud loved him with all the exacting passion of a selfish nature; while Irene, earnest, pure hearted Irene, loved him without ever dreaming of requital, and hating herself for what she deemed a passion worse than folly.

That the love of one of the sisters was returned, Creswick's frequent visits seemed to imply, for scarcely an evening passed without him, and the little family circle seemed incomplete if that favorite guest was not in its midst.

Major Emerson watched the young man's attentions with no little pleasure, for he hoped to get his girls settled in life before he left it; but which daughter attracted him most was a question he often asked himself, but could never answer.

Toward Maud, perhaps, those attentions were more marked; but then she was the elder, and precedence had its claims.

It seemed to him that the sisters were in the balance—one to be chosen and the other left. But proud Major Emerson ignored the fact except to his own conscience.

His girls were very dear to him, and as his life was precarious, and his fortune more so, the sooner he got them married to men worthy of them the better.

For the major, being a man of the world, studied well the "main point," which in his vocabulary meant money and position; and finding it without a flaw, encouraged his young friend so openly that the result was as we have seen.

"Where is your regiment now?" asked Maud, in so careless a tone that her father, if he had been present, would have been more baffled than ever.

"Oh, in the city," answered Frank, glancing at Irene.

"Then there is nothing to prevent your going to Mrs. Huntley's ball except want of inclination, although it might not be convenient for you to join the theatrical project."

"No; that project would be altogether impossible, but I will come for the ball, if you will promise to give me the first dance."

Frank rose, and placed himself on the hearthrug as he spoke. Tall and manly he looked, one to command respect as well as love and admiration.

Irene stole a sly glance at him. Their eyes met; hers were hastily withdrawn, but his lingered with an expression that set the jealous heart of Maud beating angrily.

Irene rose to quit the room.

"You will return, if you find your father asleep?" asked Francis, following her to the door.

"Did I say I was going to my father?" she laughingly questioned.

"I know you are, but please return, as there is a matter upon which I must speak to you before I leave. Yet—stay. The evening of the ball will be a more auspicious time, and remember, I shall claim your hand for the second waltz."

Maud heard the whispered words, and saw the look which accompanied them. Her heart told her what it was that Francis Creswick wished to say to her sister, and with flushed cheek and bated breath, she inwardly vowed, that the chance he wished for to declare his love, should never come; by fair means or foul she would prevent it, and trust to fate to do the rest for her. Marry her sister—marry

Irene! never! But she would bring him to her feet sooner or later, and as for Irene, she must get over her fancy as best she could.

"Well, Miss Emerson," resumed Francis, turning to Maud when they were alone, "you have not answered my question. Am I to have the first waltz? Miss Irene has promised me the second."

"Indeed! Well, I shall tell you when the time arrives!"

Major Emerson did not interfere with his daughters' enjoyment that evening.

He was sleeping tranquilly when Irene went to him, so she returned to the drawing-room, and the hours passed swiftly.

That night Captain Creswick left for his father's country seat.

"Have you promised what Captain Creswick asked you, Maud?" questioned Irene, when that young gentleman had taken his departure.

"I shall tell him when the time arrives!" answered Maud, shortly.

CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN'S WILES.

MRS. HUNTLEY'S ball was fixed for ten days hence; but within that space, short as it was, a great sorrow fell on the life of the sisters, and her doors were closed in sympathy or condolence for them.

The morning after the last visit of Francis Creswick, Major Emerson's bell was hastily rung. The girls knew his valet was in attendance, and for a moment could not understand so loud a peal, but Irene ran up-stairs and found her father pale and haggard, lying in the arms of his faithful servant.

"Oh, father, you are worse!" she cried, gently putting herself in the man's place.

"I am dying, my darling!" he murmured.

"No need to fetch a doctor this time; but I should like to see—to see Captain Creswick and my poor Maud. Listen, Irene, my love; do not be too hard on your poor old father when he is gone, for—for—oh, my child, I have done you a great wrong. I have left you—left you both—both beggars! This is the heaviest—"

The sentence was never finished.

The day of the funeral had come and gone, the last sad rites were over, and together the two girls, now doubly orphaned, sat in the gathering twilight in the same room which held such happy memories for them.

Their family lawyer had just gone, leaving them almost stunned by the double shock of their father's death and the crushing intelligence that they were beggars! that they were alone in the world almost without a roof to shelter them.

Their father had to the last kept the truth from them, hoping that by a brilliant marriage either one or both would be provided for. But now it was too late; the handsome property which they had never dreamed could belong to any one but them had been mortgaged for more than its market value and would be, ere the week was over, in the hands of creditors. All, all was gone, swallowed up in the speculations of Major Emerson, who, once having begun, kept on in the vain hope of retrieving his fortune, until all was gone! the little personal property of each girl was literally all they had to face the world with; when that was gone what then was to be done—where could they turn?

From her own sad thoughts Irene turned to her sister.

"Oh, I would not care, I would not mind how poor we are if we only had papa here. Maudy, what shall we do without him? how will we ever fight the battle of life alone?"

"He should never have left us to fight the battle you speak of, Irene."

"Don't say that, Maud—you shall not blame him. The world was too much for him—circumstances were against him; he could not help it, and you know it. Darling sister, do not feel so bitterly."

"Hush! you must not try to soften me.

You are too young to understand our position, and the terrible wrong that has been done us. Here we are, two girls, both under twenty, having been reared in luxury, refinement and love, driven from all three by the rashness of a thoughtless father. Oh, it is cruel!"

"But, Maud, we have friends—good, kind friends, who will do all in their power to render our life endurable to us. Mrs. Huntley, I am sure, will do her best, and Captain Creswick—"

Here Irene hesitated and blushed crimson.

Maud saw the blush and marked the hesitation. A cold, cruel look, mingled with triumph, came into her eyes, which gentle Irene would have wondered much at had she noticed it.

"Shall I tell you something, Irene?" she said suddenly. "I would not grieve you willingly, but it is best you should know the truth. Captain Creswick is a scoundrel, and no gentleman!"

"Maud! explain yourself!"

"I will. You thought you had won the love of Francis Creswick, didn't you? Nay, you needn't blush—long ago I knew your secret—and that you thought yourself beloved in return. But, Irene, what if I tell you that he has made love to me—has won my affections also—has shown himself to be a heartless villain—winning my heart, but to cast it aside when it suited his pleasure?"

"Maud, my poor darling! is it possible that you love him? And I never guessed it. Ah! how blind I have been—and to have imagined myself for one minute preferred to you, by him. It was a sad mistake of mine, dear. I know it. How could he for a minute have fancied me when you were by? My vanity must have strangely carried me away, that I should so have misconstrued his kindness. Maud, do not look at me so—it is true! he has never spoken one word to me but what a brother might. And of course he loves you. Now I think of it. I have been blind not to guess it long ago. And you really care for him, Maud—my cold, pale sister! I cannot realize it—yet I am glad. He will make you a charming husband, and all will go as merry as a marriage-bell."

So Irene rattled on, bravely disguising the shock such news had been to her, and determining in her heart of hearts that never should her sister know what her supposed mistake had cost her.

"But you, Irene?"

"I? Oh it is nothing. Never mind me. It was only a fancy, which soon will be thought no more of. He is so good, so noble and brave, I really couldn't help making a little of a hero of him; but as your husband, I will be awfully fond of him, Maudy, and he will make me such a nice brother!"

"He will never be your brother, Irene. My mind is made up. Your eyes are blinded and you do not see him in the true light. He is fickle, inconstant, untrue. I will tear his image from my heart before I will let him know for a single instant what a fool I have been to give my love unsought."

"Maud, dear, you are wrong. He cannot be untrue—and to you!—oh, never. It is your imagination—you have misconstrued his actions, as you will find when he has made it all right with you."

"Which I shall never give him the chance to do. No, Irene, he is false. Why has he not called since our father's death? Why! I can tell you. He has heard that we are poor now, and has made up his mind to gracefully back out before it is too late."

Irene gazed piteously at her sister.

"Maud, I cannot believe it! he would not have left us in that heartless manner—there must be some mistake—some misunderstanding—"

"There is none. We are poor; that is all, Irene. You will now have the opportunity of seeing what our friends are made of. They will all follow the same course; we are beneath them in our poverty!"

"But surely Mrs. Huntley will not desert us."

"Mrs. Huntley would be just as bad as the rest. Perhaps not so openly—she would condole with us, and may be suggest some infeasible plan for our future, all the time wishing she could wash her hands of us. No; we will go to none of them for help; they shall not even know where we are or what doing. Our lawyer has proved our only friend in time of need. He has written to Mr. Veitcher, a personal friend of his, a clergyman in Chatham, who has procured a little house for us, and will use his influence in our behalf to get us pupils—"

"Then we are to be schoolmistresses," interrupted Irene. "Oh, that is delightful! I love little children and—"

"I wish you would not interrupt me so," resumed Miss Emerson. "Yes; we are to become school-teachers—how I shudder at the thought! But it may not last long, for I suppose like other girls, we shall marry, who knows? However, we will not speculate on that now. Mr. Veitcher expects us on Thursday, and I wish you would write him a note, telling him his directions shall be carried out, and letting him know by what train we will arrive."

"Thursday! so soon? But, Maud, surely you cannot mean we will go away without leaving any word as to our whereabouts? Surely that would not be right, for our friends, or those who were our friends, must take some interest in us yet, and I have promised Miss Huntley—"

"Never mind your promises. My plan shall be carried out. Neither she, nor least of all, Captain Creswick, whom she would be sure to tell, shall know what has become of us. We will begin a new life in a strange place, and let us hope all will go well. Now, will you go and write the note as I requested?"

Irene knew she could do nothing but comply with her sister's commands, for having always submitted to what she had considered Maud's superior judgment, it would now do no good to attempt to combat her orders. Nevertheless, as she left the room her heart was heavy and her thoughts were sad enough—not the less sad that she could not understand the conduct of Captain Creswick, whom she loved, and who, she felt sure, would not desert them because of their fallen fortunes, even though she could not but own to herself that appearances were very much against him. Why, oh, why, had he not come, or at least written and explained the reason of his absence.

If he would but come and make Maud happy, she could bear her own suffering; but to go away, never to look upon his face again, to have her sister pining away in a strange place—oh, it was too much! how could she ever stand it? And she knew that Captain Creswick was an honorable man. If she had thought he loved her, that was her mistake, and was all over now. However, she knew how useless it would be to try to change Maud's plans, and she could only pray that it would all come right in time, and every cloud be cleared away.

When Irene had left the room Maud sprung to her feet and gave way to a fit of passion, which one would almost deem impossible in a girl so young, so fair and refined.

"Go to your room, my dainty little sister," she hissed, "there to sob and weep your eyes out over your broken hopes and the grave of your first love! Take it out in crying, for if my plans go right, you have looked your last upon the face of him you love. So, Francis Creswick! You would overlook my love, my beauty and talents, to fall in love with the milk and water prettiness of my baby sister. Well, we shall see who triumphs. You will fly to the arms of your beloved Irene, will you? for so your note, hidden in the depths of my pocket, says. You will fly, but find her not. Your friend and confidante, Mrs. Huntley, will not be able to give you information, either. No one will but our lawyer, and his lips are sealed at my request; fortunate that

you had not before this had the opportunity for an explanation with Irene, or I would have been foiled. As it is, the cards are mine. Let him laugh who wins!"

CHAPTER III.

A NEW LIFE.

THE clergyman and his wife were true friends to the orphan girls. Many crooked paths were made straight for them, and delicate little attentions shown which could not hurt even the sensitive pride of Maud.

Highly remunerative pupils flocked in upon them, and Irene took to her new position wonderfully; but Maud could not hide her misery and discontent.

Mrs. Veitcher saw but ignored it, trusting to time for that which it would never bring forth—a woman strong in her heart and strength; and so weeks grew into months.

Irene was the idol of the little school—or, rather, day pupils, as they were respectably called; and Maud, seeing her sister in a fair way of getting on without her, quietly drew out a line of action for herself.

She hated the dull routine of their everyday life and saw no way of escaping it as long as she stayed in Chatham, so one day she aroused all Irene's fears by telling her that her health was gradually fading and that unless she could have a change she would not be answerable for the consequences—that she had thought the matter over and decided that if she could get a situation in some nice city family as companion or governess, where her duties would be comparatively light, and where she could procure the best medical aid if needed, that her health might gradually be restored.

So Irene set at once about procuring a situation as governess for her through Mr. Veitcher.

After many difficulties and disappointments, Maud entered the family of a wealthy merchant, principally residing in New York, on the terms stipulated—that she should be treated as a member of the family, and with sole charge of one little girl, who was petted and spoiled by her parents—where Maud felt so happy that she wondered why she had remained so long at the school; besides, she was glad to return to a little of the gayety of city life.

Mr. Kirwan was a man of quiet, homely habits. His fondness for his little girl, whom he looked upon with a species of idolatry, and an over-admiration for his pretty young wife, were among the strongest feelings he possessed.

His wife was twenty years younger than himself, and a good and charitable woman, and in heart and mind an honest, upright little lady.

At all events, they were much beloved by the poor, and never censured by the rich. How they managed to steer their course so clearly between two such opposite courses was a mystery to many, yet they went on from day to day in peace and safety.

Maud was not long in noticing the attachment of this couple, contrasting it with what she had seen between her own parents. Here there was nothing but peace, a calm joy, a steady, beautiful happiness that spread its beneficence to every bosom that came within its influence.

So Maud could not help being comfortable with those whose delight it was to make every one happy.

Among the few intimate friends of the family was a gentleman of about forty-five, who, since the addition of Miss Emerson to the household circle, had become a more constant visitor than before, and whose undisguised admiration of the governess was not only sanctioned, but encouraged, by the two heads of the establishment.

Jasper Warrington soon learned to love Miss Emerson, but was held from openly avowing the feeling by her coldness, and more particularly by the disparity of their ages. Wealthy,

and, better still, rich in every noble quality, the generous man shrunk from the fear of detection by the poor but proud beauty, who had warmed his heart with a true passion, because his years more than doubled the number of those that had rolled over the life of the beautiful lady of his heart.

Miss Emerson had been more than six months in the family of Mr. Kirwan when his wife one morning entered the apartment specially allotted to the governess.

It was a cosy little sitting-room, hung richly with crimson drapery, which, added to the ruddy glow of the cheerful fire, formed a comfortable contrast to the snow-clad prospect outside the window.

The lady, holding a letter in her hand, tapped gently before turning the handle of the door, and not receiving a reply, ventured forward.

She stood irresolute for a few moments, gazing upon Maud, who was seated upon a couch by the fire, reading a newspaper six weeks old.

Even as Mrs. Kirwan stood beside her, she read and re-read one paragraph with fixed attention:—

"Latest departure from — Hotel, Washington, Captain Francis Creswick, of the — Regiment, for his father's residence in Cambridge, where rumor asserts he will shortly be married to the beautiful Jane Crompton, the accomplished daughter of," etc., etc.

Mrs. Kirwan stood gazing upon her in amazement, for she had hardly thought that the pale governess could look so lovely. The one want of those classic features was now supplied, the cold void filled up, for the colors of life and animation were spread over her face; heart and soul were breathing in those fine features, and her beauty for the time was perfect.

The couch on which she sat was covered with crimson damask, which relieved the sable costume that fitted Maud's elegant figure to perfection. Her cheeks were slightly flushed from agitation, and her countenance was lustrous with inward light, but its reflection was that of hate or anger, rather than any kind or womanly feeling.

She started when the hand of the merchant's wife was laid upon her shoulder, and as she turned, the light faded from her countenance, leaving it as placid as before.

"My dear Miss Emerson," began Mrs. Kirwan, "I regret having disturbed you, for you look so different now that you know I am here to what you did when you thought yourself alone. Something in that newspaper has moved you strangely."

"Nothing," she replied, "unless the news of the convalescence of one who was a friend in former years."

"That," remarked Mrs. Kirwan, "must surely be a happiness."

"Yes, if the friend be true," replied the girl.

"My dear, a friend could not be false; for if by circumstances he should appear so, time would prove the contrary. Should, unhappily, temptation make him waver in his feelings or purpose, then, indeed, he is no longer worthy of the name, but when we can rejoice in the restoration of a mere acquaintance from a couch of suffering to health and enjoyment, how much more happiness can bring the convalescence of one who was deeply prized in the 'long ago,' that time which ever brings a sweet reminiscence to every heart, however cold it may appear externally."

"Some good-natured people," answered the other, abruptly, "feel a satisfaction in the welfare of their acquaintance. I feel indifference, if indifference can be called a feeling."

Maud frowned darkly; then, with an energy that startled her companion, said:

"Oh, Mrs. Kirwan, imagine a young girl, true and confiding; imagine your own little daughter grown up to womanhood, her love sued for, won, prized for awhile, then cast

aside, scorned and rejected for some new passion! What would you say to him who broke her heart? How would she feel who was the victim of his falsehood? Would she pine away in silence, and obligingly die to give place to a rival? Would she act the generous heroine by crowning their happiness with her forgiveness? Well, I would not do so. It would be sweeter to me—it would be balm to my wounded pride—to see him—him the loved but false one, stricken by the hand of judgment; to watch him writhe in pain and torture, goaded by remorse, or to see him dead!"

The governess had risen to her feet, under the influence of strong excitement; but on perceiving Mrs. Kirwan shrinking from her, made a hurried apology, adding, with a sickly smile, "I—I have not been speaking of myself. But you know that some natures are more revengeful than others."

A strange fire now burned in the eyes of the governess, which made the other recoil from her.

Maud, seeing Mrs. Kirwan's startled expression, laughed lightly, and the elder lady gladly turned her thoughts to the subject of the letter.

"This is an invitation from an old friend, Miss Emerson," she said; "and as it is impossible for my husband to accompany me, I have come to beg that you will confer a favor by doing so. It will be quite a family dinner-party, with the exception, perhaps, of Mr. Jasper Warrington. I know Mrs. Crompton will be delighted to welcome you."

Maud, concealing her secret satisfaction, murmured a polite acquiescence, and Mrs. Kirwan, with more friendliness of manner than she had ever before shown, added:

"Lily is very much attached to you, Miss Emerson, and in her name pray accept a little present from me. It will look well with your black dress, and relieve its monotony. A jet necklet, studded with seed pearls, is not unseemly in your present mourning. By the way, dear, when did you hear last from your sister? Mr. Veitcher is rapturous in praise of her."

"I heard this morning. Irene is most grateful for Mr. Veitcher's kindness. She spends much of her time at the Rectory; and it is a great relief to my mind to have her so safely placed."

"Your sister is a most winning girl, I hear?"

"Yes; every one loves Iney."

"She is your junior?"

"By two years; but she is still like a child at times. Our father's death sobered her a good deal; but generally she is light-hearted and happy, as though she had never known a care."

"Would you not like her to be with you during the Christmas holidays?"

"Oh, Mrs. Kirwan, I shall be glad—so happy!"

"Then it shall be so, my dear. The truth is, I am longing to see this bright Irene."

Mrs. Kirwan took a chaste and costly ornament from a casket as she spoke, and, after fastening it on the neck of the governess, hurried from the room to avoid thanks.

"Go to Mrs. Crompton's!" muttered Maud, when she found herself alone. "Yes, yes, Mrs. Kirwan, I will go to Mrs. Crompton's, and wear this necklace, too."

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"I HAVE taken the liberty of bringing a friend with me," said Mrs. Kirwan, introducing Maud.

"Dear Georgina," answered Mrs. Crompton, holding the young girl's hand in her own, "any friend of yours must be a welcome guest of mine."

She drew Maud toward the fire, where sat a gentleman, who began a lively conversation with Mrs. Kirwan, during which she found his gaze resting on her somewhat rudely, until Mrs. Crompton summoned him to her side.

"Theodore, my dear, allow me to introduce you to my new acquaintance, Miss Emerson. My husband, Mr. Crompton."

Directly as she had said the words, the fashionable lady, who was much older than her husband, and decidedly plainer looking, turned to receive some fresh arrivals, leaving Maud with, to her, a very disagreeable companion; not that he either lisped or stuttered, or wearied her with frivolous small talk, or drawled out a description of the last new opera, or boasted of his bets on the election. On the contrary, he was what is termed an intellectual man; he spoke of the fine arts, of poetry, music and painting; gave an entertaining description of his journey up the Rhine, and related some amusing anecdotes, in which he himself figured as the hero, while ascending the Alps. Yet Maud thought in her heart that a person so disagreeable as Mrs. Crompton's husband she had never before met.

There was a hurtful familiarity in the man's manners, a look in his bold eyes that repelled her. Once she endeavored to return his gaze, and by so doing let it become apparent that she conveyed rebuke; but she recognized a smile lurking about his rather well-shaped features that made her hate him more intensely. However, she was soon relieved, by his wife joining them again.

"Theodore, my love," she said, "had you not better give others of your guests more of your society? You know how stupid I am, and how they delight in you."

"You—a jealous old lady!" whispered Theodore in his wife's ear as he rose to depart; "but I will have my flirtation out with that handsome creature, in spite of you." Then smiling and adding aloud: "Yes, my dear, I shall do as you desire, provided you take care of our charming friend here until I return."

He pointed to Miss Emerson, and carelessly joined a knot of gentlemen who were crowded round a lady on the opposite sofa—a lady whom Maud had been trying to obtain a glimpse of for the last five minutes.

But the attention of the lady was drawn to the fireplace instead. Mr. Crompton addressed her, and Maud saw Mrs. Huntley bowing toward her.

Her first impulse was to rise and greet an old friend; her next to shrink back, repelled at the coldness of her former friend's recognition.

"It is just as I told Irene. I am only a poor governess now," she thought, bitterly, "and she cannot afford to know me."

But, as if in contradiction of anything so ungenerous, Mrs. Huntley advanced toward Miss Emerson.

"I am delighted at this meeting," said Maud, advancing half-way and holding out her hand. But the other did not seem to reciprocate the feeling, for she withdrew the tips of her fingers, bowing stiffly, without a word.

Miss Emerson was standing almost in the center of the room, and every one had witnessed this rebuff. Some tittered, others curled their lips disdainfully, but most frowned reprovingly. She felt as if she would have liked the ground to open and let her take a peep-show into the apartment beneath. Yet her appearance never varied. The proud head grew more erect, perhaps, for a moment, and that was all. Then she knew that some one was beside her who held out his arm for her acceptance; it was Jasper Warrington. She took it, smiling, and walked with him to the furthest end of the room.

Mrs. Crompton felt personally aggrieved at Mrs. Huntley's manner to her guest, and as she was a bad hypocrite, her demeanor soon showed it; but fortunately dinner was announced, and during its progress she was too well bred to admit of any restraint or dullness.

When they returned to the drawing-room, Maud felt her position almost too uncomfortable to bear. She would have begged Mrs. Kirwan to allow her to leave on the plea of illness; but could not disturb that genial little

lady, who, declaring herself passionately fond of music, kept chattering to those next her during the most striking passages of many fine and well-executed pieces; while Maud, who did not care for it, was silent, heartily sick of the state and ceremony of the whole entertainment, and wearied to death of the gentlemen who surrounded her. She was turning for relief to some drawings beside her, when her attention was riveted by the mention of a name that was but too familiar to her heart.

"So you say Creswick is sure of his promotion? He is a lucky fellow, and proves that in some cases bravery is rewarded."

"Yes," said a second voice; "he ought to be pretty certain of promotion, for it is already obtained."

Maud listened long in vain, with her ears aching for the repetition of that one dear name.

It came at last.

"What brings Creswick up North in the height of the Washington season, I wonder?"

"Oh!" again returned the first voice, "I hear it is to see his betrothed, and make preparations for their immediate nuptials. She is a relative of Mrs. Crompton's, and immensely wealthy."

The group around Miss Emerson saw her pale face grow whiter than ever as the fatal words reached her. Francis Creswick on the eve of wedding another!

So, she had separated him from her sister only to have him marry another. Then he was a flirt after all! for had he really loved Irene, he could not have so readily consoled himself for her loss.

Like one on the edge of a precipice who feels an unaccountable desire to plunge down headforemost, she listened to every sentence, though each one was a fresh stab to her heart.

"Talking of Creswick," said a new voice, "his conduct at Newport last season was not over honorable, more particularly as he had been engaged at the time to Mrs. Crompton's niece. Do you remember the charming little Quakeress with whom he struck up such an elaborate flirtation, until he got himself and the lady well talked about, and then he withdrew from the field?"

"Yes; I recollect perfectly. But the lady was not a Quakeress; she was an elder daughter of Major Emerson—a beautiful girl, I am told, although demure and haughty; however, I am not quite sure that I can go with you as far as she is concerned; for Francis Creswick had the most sincere liking for the major himself, and I believe it was real friendship for him, as much as admiration for his daughter, that took him so often to the house."

"Then he had more than one daughter: he is dead now, poor old gentleman! Yes; I remember. They were at the beach for the benefit of his health. Is the other girl as handsome as our Quakeress?"

"Not by any means; so rumor says. I don't know, for I have never seen either."

"But I have," put in a new voice.

Maud looked sharply at its owner, who was a young man with one of the grandest faces she had ever seen.

"I know both by sight and can assert a fact—the younger is far and away the more beautiful."

"Then I should like to see the younger."

"I am quite satisfied with the elder."

What more welcome or unwelcome information might have been wafted to Maud was prevented by a white-gloved hand placed lightly on her shoulder.

"Maud, can you ever forgive me?" cried Mrs. Huntley.

Miss Emerson drew back, slightly startled.

"Forgive you, Mrs. Huntley, for what?" she answered, coldly.

"For my treatment of you this evening."

"Oh, that was—to be expected! I am only a dependent now."

"Maud!"

"Mrs. Huntley!"

"You have wronged every friend you once possessed; and in this thought you have wronged me a second time."

"I can scarcely believe so."

"You wronged us all in believing that we only prized you and Irene on account of your position. You fled from those who would have helped you, and in your false pride cast our friendship to the winds. More than myself here have tried to find you, but in vain. What have you done with Irene?"

"Iney is well and happy."

"Can I see her? Oh, Maud, Maud! I feel very bitterly because you could doubt me, and I loved Irene better than any other girl in the world, and even she could think my friendship worthless!"

Miss Emerson looked into the earnest eyes bent down upon her. There was no mistaking their truth, and her own drooped as she made room beside her, and drew her companion to a seat.

"Mrs. Huntley, I have indeed misunderstood you. Forgive me!"

"Yes; I must forgive you. My husband will be here presently. He will be so glad that I have recovered my lost ones. And now you must tell me all about yourself, and when I am to see Irene."

"Mrs. Kirwan intends to invite her for the Christmas holidays, which will be soon."

"I shall see her then?"

"Do you know Mrs. Kirwan?"

"We never met until to night. Are you not anxious to know how many friends have been inquiring after you since you vanished from the world? Captain Creswick was perhaps more indignant than myself. He came to say good-by to us, and seemed to feel very deeply the loss of your dear father, Maud."

Maud's countenance never wavered. She made no reply, and Mrs. Huntley continued:

"Of course you know of his return? He is now with his father and sister. A dear girl is Miss Creswick. And then he comes to town on a visit to Mrs. Crompton, who intends celebrating his visit by a splendid ball. You and Irene shall be invited, and I will be your chaperon, for Mrs. Kirwan does not attend balls, I understand. Did you know that Captain Creswick—Major, I should say, for he has attained that rank now—is a relative of Mrs. Crompton's?"

"No. I heard that he is to marry a niece of hers, and until that happy event I suppose he is not a relative."

"Oh!"—Mrs. Huntley glanced sharply at her companion as she made the ejaculation—"so you have heard that story? Well, for my part, I don't believe it. Her niece is a plain girl, with a very large fortune, and Francis Creswick is the last man to marry for money. She is at present away, but may return for this ball. Here is one of the truest gentlemen I know—Jasper Warrington; one whom all the belles of each season have tried in vain to captivate. By the way, Maud, he was very attentive to you this evening. I quite envied you at dinner, he is so delightful to converse with. He—he is coming this way."

Mr. Warrington joined them, and the conversation becoming general, both ladies had ample opportunity of judging for themselves as to his capabilities, of which, perhaps, their appreciation was best shown by their reluctance to depart even when Mr. Huntley had declared for the third time that it was very late.

As they drove home, Mrs. Kirwan, pleading fatigue, sunk back in the soft cushions of her carriage and remained silent, giving Maud ample opportunity to revolve in her mind the incidents of that, to her, eventful evening; how she had misinterpreted Mrs. Huntley's coldness, and misunderstood her loyal nature; how a terrible despair had come over her heart at the news of Major Creswick going to be wedded to a stranger; and how Jasper Warrington had singled her out for his attentions, making her the envied of the envious.

This latter feeling was rather congenial to her, and raised her spirits wonderfully as she

seated herself before the ruddy fire in her cosy chamber.

No thought of her young sister disturbed her peace; yet at that moment Irene's bright head was tossing restlessly on her pillow, unable to court sleep with thoughts of Maud.

CHAPTER V.

A SISTER'S ENVY.

"AND this is Irene!" said Mrs. Kirwan, drawing the muffled figure toward her, and looking at the laughing, bright young girl.

One scrutinizing glance was enough to satisfy her heart. She drew the girl nearer, and kissed her. Mr. Kirwan was rather astonished at such a proceeding on the part of his undemonstrative wife, and passed a cheerful remark about it.

"I could not help it," said the lady, quietly. "Irene and I are friends already. My dear, will you go to your room, or take off your wraps here?"

She chose the former, and soon she and Maud were alone.

"Oh, how comfortable you are, Maudy, dear!" exclaimed Irene, looking around the elegant apartment which had been appropriated to her use. "What a darling little lady Mrs. Kirwan is! The child is a dear pet, I know. And Mr. Kirwan—what a delightful old gentleman! I declare I could have kissed him, too, with all my heart."

"Still the same childish Irene," laughed Miss Emerson, giving the fire a stir that sent the glowing sparks over the steel fender.

"Still the same loving sister." She came to the mantle-piece as she spoke. "Let me look at you, Maudy; how you have improved; grown handsomer than ever, I declare! Oh, my dear, I cannot tell you how happy I am to be with you again! It was so kind, so very kind of Mrs. Kirwan to ask me up for the holidays! I have poor little Ponsey still to keep me company, of course; but I am always very lonely without you, Maud."

"The Veitchers have been attentive to you?"

"Indeed, yes, more than attentive. I almost live at the parsonage. I think it will come to that in time, for Mrs. Veitcher has already asked—what do you think she has asked me, Maudy?"

"To live with her, I suppose."

"To be a daughter to her—to let them adopt me—fancy that; and now I am beginning to know how wrong we were to run away from our friends, for when strangers can be so kind, why not they?"

"We shall not speak of that now. Do you think the Veitchers really meant to take you as their own child?"

"I am sure of it; they are old, and have no children of their own. Besides, they knew our dear father long ago. But, Maudy, it is very lonely, even at the parsonage; and—and I miss papa so much—more than ever, I think!"

Irene's tears were falling now, but she checked them as she encountered Maud's stony gaze.

"Repining is a weakness I have no sympathy with," said Miss Emerson. "Better forget, if you can. We have each stern duties to perform—duties foreign to our natures, inconsistent with our birth, and at variance with what we expected. We must steel ourselves to the task, Irene, and the only way to do that is to forget what we have been, and think of what we are—two young girls, thrown on a pitiless world to scramble for a living."

"I do not think the world is pitiless."

"Because you do not know it. So far on our way through it, taking it from the turning point of our father's death, we have been fortunate, you with the Veitchers, I with the Kirwans. They are both pillars of the Church, and for that reason, I suppose, are better than other people. However, be that as it may, you and I know what we have to do, and do it we must—either place ourselves in an independent position, or go on slaving for the re-

mainder of our lives. I prefer the former, I admit."

"By marriage?"

"Of course. How else?"

"But you—I think you still love Captain Creswick, Maudy."

"What! after his contemptible desertion of us?"

"There *must* have been some misunderstanding."

"He is nothing to me; I am nothing to him."

"You could not convince me of that."

"Why?"

"Because he came to us so often, and I believe that you were the attraction. I know he loved papa very dearly; no one could doubt that, for he showed it in every way, and papa loved him. His last word was to see you both; I don't know what he had in his mind, only he wanted to see you both."

Irene again drew the check-string of her emotion, and stood so coldly by the mantle-piece, that she might have been the reflection of Miss Emerson herself.

"It was only to say good-by," remarked Maud. "I don't believe in a death-bed remorse or repentance. Major Emerson's daughters should never have been cast adrift almost penniless, and without a home."

"But we have both of us found friends and a home, and it will be our own fault if we are not happy."

Miss Emerson looked at her sister rather astonished; the child could become a woman at times, it seemed.

"I am happy enough, and you will soon be accustomed to the seclusion of the parsonage, if you accept Mr. Veitcher's offer. They are very rich, and you would inherit a large fortune at their death."

Irene shuddered, but replied, pleasantly: "I trust that will be a long way off. Have you seen Major Creswick since his return, Maudy?"

"How did you know he had returned at all?"

"Newspapers inform us of such events."

"Of course. No, I have not seen him; but we are talking here too long; we may expect the first dinner-bell at any moment. I see your trunks are open and some of your dresses already in the wardrobe. What are you going to wear? Something nice, I hope."

"This black net dress."

"What ornaments?"

"That beautiful white rose I see on my dressing-table."

"Nonsense, Irene! I mean jewels?"

"You know I—"

"Dear Iney," Maud interrupted, "I quite forgot that you have no jewels. Well, never mind, you will look nice enough without them. And now, dear, I will leave you to dress, or shall I do your hair? No? Well, I shall be back before you are ready, and we can go down together."

Miss Emerson left the room, and Irene hastened to array herself, bravely combating the affectionate longings of her heart, which were cruelly disappointed.

She had pictured to herself a very different meeting with her sister.

Irene's visit had not extended many days when Maud's manner to her assumed a puzzling coldness. Free from petty meanness herself, she could not understand it in others, and the idea of Maud being jealous never entered her mind. Yet such was, in truth, the fact.

Little Lily, the pet and darling of the household, had whispered in confidence to her maid that she wished Miss Emerson would go away and leave Miss Irene in her stead; and of course that whispered confidence soon became public property. Mrs. Kirwan's preference was marked from the first evening, her husband's also; in short, the young girl had won without an effort where the elder had failed with all her endeavors. Maud knew this, and could not forgive it.

With her usual gentle forbearance Irene sought to break down the barrier which she felt was rising between them; but the attempt

was fruitless, and at last pride came to her aid and enabled her to bear with seeming calmness that which in secret chafed and pained her.

Still, despite little drawbacks, the visit was a pleasant one. Mrs. Kirwan took care that the girls should be well supplied with amusements, and as she could not participate in them herself, good Mrs. Huntley was always invited to take her place. Theaters, concerts, dinner and evening parties came in quick succession, and, by some means or other, Jasper Warrington managed to be always present. If Irene had supplanted Maud in other affections it was quite clear that she had not done so in his, for that enamored gentleman still paid undiminished court to "the beautiful Miss Emerson," a name by which Maud was fast becoming known in fashionable society.

"Do you admire Mr. Warrington?" asked Irene, unfastening her latest purchase, a plain gold bracelet.

"Every one does," remarked Maud, calmly.

"He is the great man of the day. One thing is certain; he is immensely rich, and that makes people perfect sometimes. I only wish he would not make you so conspicuous with his attentions; it looks so absurd for an old beau to be always at a young girl's elbow, as if there were not another man in the world that she would take the trouble of speaking to."

"I had no idea that you were jealous, Irene."

"Jealous—of Jasper Warrington's admiration!"

A soft peal of laughter issued from Irene's red lips, and she threw the bracelet on the dressing-table in delight.

"Envious, then?"

The laughter ceased, and Irene looked gravely at the beautiful girl before her, then laughed again.

"You are only jesting, Maudy; you know me too well to believe that. But, dear, I will tell you what I think about that old gentleman's devotion. It may do you harm in this way—when Major Creswick comes up to New York he may hear something of it; and you know how proud he is. He is sure to meet you at Mrs. Crompton's ball."

"I have told you already that Major Creswick and I are nothing to each other—nothing in that way, at least. Old habits and associations may make us friends or acquaintances, whichever suits. Mr. Warrington is attentive now; but most likely that will all vanish before long. I only hope that I may have an opportunity of rejecting or accepting himself and fortune."

"I am sure it would be impossible to accept," said Irene.

"Nothing is impossible to some people, if only opportunity be afforded."

"That little word 'if' is full contradiction to your assertion; but let us not argue the point, Maudy. I fully believed that you and Francis Creswick were attached to each other, so I naturally resented any interference between you. Is it late or early—which? Dear me, what dreadful ladies of fashion we have become! I am growing tired of it, and I think I shall be a little glad to get back to my quiet home again."

"Yes; that kind of thing suits you best."

Irene did not answer. She drew a chair to the fire, having removed her evening dress for a white wrapper while they were talking, and leaned back in the soft cushions wearily.

Maud had accompanied her to the apartment she liked better than her own—another cause of offense, which was little suspected.

"I was happier in my little cottage, lonely as it was. Mrs. Veitcher is such a friend, and Mr. Veitcher is so kind—just like Mr. and Mrs. Kirwan; but somehow it is different there. Perhaps Ponsey's affection bridges over a gap; for, you know, even a dog's affection is pleasant, Maudy."

"Irene, you are dreaming."

"Don't mind me; I often get into these moods since—since father's death. I miss him

so much. He was always thinking of me—always so loving and so gentle—always wanting to have me near him. Now no one wants that except Mrs. Veitcher and Ponsey; you don't, Maudy."

"It would be very absurd if I did. You are a sentimental child, I, a woman of the world, and the sooner you become one also, the better for your own comfort."

"I think you are right," said Irene.

Maud bade Irene a cold good-night; and she, when the door was sharply shut, looked wistfully into the ruddy fire, growing pale with fears for her sister.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE BALL.

PREPARATIONS were progressing for the ball to be given by Mrs. Crompton in honor of Major Creswick's return from Indian service. It was to be of unusual magnificence, and sure to occupy a large paragraph in fashionable newspapers, which would not know that Major Creswick, who objected to be lionized, had spent the last month quietly with his family, and had accepted Mrs. Crompton's invitation most reluctantly.

The auspicious night arrived, and the festive halls were brilliant in the extreme, various suites of apartments being lighted up with dazzling splendor, reflected on every side by gilded mirrors. The fragrant flowers, festooned in wreaths upon the richly tapestried walls, the waxen floors and velvet couches, the cool shades of the conservatory, were all perfection in their way, and the hostess looked around with an air of satisfaction as her guests began to arrive.

Major Creswick, as a matter of course, was the lion of the night, and his coming was looked forward to impatiently, not only by the rich matrons who had marriageable daughters to dispose of, but by the fair candidates themselves, who, having heard much of this fascinating individual, fluttered about decked in laces and feathers, fragile and sylph-like, and wanting only the gossamer wings to personate spirits of the air.

Maud, the beautiful but cold-hearted belle, looked bright on this particular occasion in her black net and pearls, while her luxuriant hair, arranged by Irene, was never more becoming, and more than all, the flush of excitement on her fair cheeks adds to her great beauty.

As the guests grew numerous she forgot everything in the nervous trepidation of again meeting Major Creswick. She had furtively watched the door, longing for a look of recognition, and to feel her hand once more within his clasp.

He comes at last; his name is breathed beside her; the crowd parts, and he is before her. She dares not look up, a faintness seizes her. A soft hand is laid upon her own; she starts: but it is Mrs. Huntley, whose voice in kind concern asks if she is ill. Maud makes a violent effort at self-control, and assures her that she is quite well, and looks again in the direction where she felt, rather than saw, that he still was.

Yes, it was the same noble-looking soldier, handsomer and more fascinating than ever. But there is another person, one who leans loving and confidently upon his arm, a lovely girl, radiant with happiness, and calling him Francis—a gay, laughing creature, upon whose brow a shade of sorrow seemed never to have intruded.

Was this Miss Crompton, his bride-elect? thought Maud, turning white, as the question formed itself within her mind.

Introductions, or, as Maud thinks, congratulations are thronging round them.

The lady bows gracefully and receives every set speech of those about her with polite carelessness.

At length they move down the bright vista until they are lost to the aching sight of the jealous watcher.

"My dear," said a voice, "that lady is the only sister of Major Creswick! She has just

come out, and is to be one of the reigning belles of the season!"

Was it an angel that breathed the words into her ear? Yes; surely Mrs. Huntley was an angel for once in her life!

A look of gratitude was the only answer Maud could make. She felt that if her secret had been guessed by her companion it would be in safe keeping.

When she recovered her habitual self-possession, she began to examine the guests more minutely, and found, as usual, Jasper Warrington among them.

Dancing commenced, but Major Creswick sought her not, although she was surrounded by gentlemen soliciting her hand for the quadrille then forming, through which she moved mechanically, until she found herself standing opposite to Miss Creswick, whose gaze was riveted upon her.

She returned the scrutiny, and the other smiled; but when the set was ended Maud resumed her place beside Mrs. Huntley, almost repellent in her coldness.

"Frank," said Grace Creswick, "yonder is a lady, very beautiful, but so like a statue, that, in truth, I fear she has as little heart as one!"

"Yes, near the window," returned the major, smiling; "but you are mistaken, for she is all soul and sentiment! Yes, a very lovely girl indeed!"

"Nonsense, Frank! That is a disappointed belle of renowned repute—a ridiculous little creature; I mean she, sitting beside Mrs. Huntley just at the door of the conservatory, dressed in second mourning, which suits her style exactly, and from the recollection of a likeness you once showed me of Miss Emerson, I believe it to be her."

"It is so!" replied her brother. "And I am glad to find my pencil as faithful as your memory, for she is the most classically-beautiful creature I have ever beheld; but still you are mistaken as to heart, for she has plenty of it."

"Yes," said Grace, "for herself!"

"Ill-natured critic!" returned Frank. "What a wicked reader of character you have become already!"

"Oh, Frank, I should never like my sister if Maud Emerson were to be your wife!"

"Silly child!" answered Frank. "What has given birth to such a thought? Surely if a young man sketches a very fine head, and places it in his portfolio, among what he considers to be his best specimens of art, it is no proof that he is in love with the original, still less that he means to marry her."

Miss Creswick could not reply, for, at the moment, one gentleman more favored than any other of her admirers, claimed her hand for the next dance.

Francis gazed after her with brotherly pride, then made his way toward the conservatory with the intention of addressing Miss Emerson, but turned aside on finding her engaged in conversation with Mrs. Huntley and Mr. Jasper Warrington, who was not only famous for his wealth, but for a fascination lacked by many younger men. Both combined rendered him an attractive prize to most luminaries of fashion, who envied the young girl the admiration he lavished upon her.

If Francis were disappointed in his design of speaking to Miss Emerson, his countenance did not show it. His looks had been wandering more or less all the evening to a young girl whose earnestness was a remarkable contrast to those around her.

Irene, clad in deeper mourning than her sister, with white camellias in her hair and bosom, stood a little apart from the dancers, carrying on an animated conversation with young Mr. Massey.

Major Creswick had approached her on two or three occasions, but being, like every brave man, a coward in love, not deeming that love reciprocated, had not ventured to address her.

Now their looks met, and Irene, blushing

and smiling, held out her hand. In an instant it was pressed within his own, and her former partner withdrew.

"Met at last!" murmured Francis.

"I am so glad to see you!" replied Irene, like a commonplace girl, which she was not.

"If you but knew the pain you caused me by that unnatural disappearance! But we shall not speak of it here. You will allow me to call on you?"

"Maud will be delighted to welcome you. Of course, you know we live with Mrs. Kirwan?"

"So I have learned to-night."

Irene was looking into the impassioned eyes, but did not fancy their light was warmed by any admiration for herself. Maud was beautiful, and Francis loved her. She concluded that because of this he was elated at making the appointment for the morrow.

They were not left long together. Irene's hand was claimed by the owner of the next name on her tablet, and she was whirled away from the envious Francis.

"Where will you rest?" asked Miss Creswick's partner, as he was about to lead her to a seat.

Grace had watched Irene gliding gracefully through the waltz, then lost her among the exotics.

"In the conservatory," she answered. "It is so delightfully cool; besides, I want to see a flower there in which I take an interest."

They passed on, and Maud, still chatting with Mrs. Huntley and her elderly admirer did not appear to notice them; while Mr. Warrington, enchanted by her attention, launched into a florid description of his India life and travels round the world, which, fluent and interesting as they were, fell now upon unheeding ears.

Mrs. Huntley, who had overheard the playful reply of Miss Creswick, which she construed into a challenge for an introduction to her companion, laid her hand upon Miss Emerson's arm, and, while bowing an apology to Mr. Warrington, asked her to accompany her to the conservatory.

"My dear," said she, "I verily believe before this night is over you will have a proposal from that gentleman. If you accept him, he will make you not only the most fashionable, but the most envied lady in New York."

"Impossible!" returned Maud. "Who could envy the bride of such a vain elderly man?"

"You must be very superficial, Maud, if you cannot detect the refinement of a noble heart beneath the frank manner of him you call vain. I assure you there are many ladies in this assembly who would deem themselves honored by the attention you have treated so cavalierly this evening; but you may be Mrs. Warrington for all your indifference. And such I prophesy to be the end of Mr. Jasper Warrington's very marked manner toward you."

CHAPTER VII.

BOUND BY HONOR.

"WHAT a lovely flower!" said a musical voice beside Irene.

She turned, and Grace Creswick smilingly bowed to her.

"Excuse me," added Grace, blushing, "I mistook you for my partner, who, I think, must have deserted me. No, here he is; and as we are all supposed to know each other in a friendly assembly like the present, I shall take the liberty of introducing myself. You, madam," she said, bowing to Mrs. Huntley, "know me a little already."

They were standing in a group under a spreading palm, and made a pretty picture.

There was a mischievous twinkle in the lilac eyes of the merry girl, which told that the mistake was a hoax; for Grace was deeply interested in any acquaintance of her brother's, and took this means of knowing the Emersons.

Mrs. Huntley greeted her cordially, and thus Irene was formally introduced to Miss Creswick.

Grace was a fascinating creature, fresh, trusting, and sincere; a child in innocence and mirth, a woman in affection and unselfish devotion, looking on the glitter of society almost as an infant would upon a gilded toy, never dreaming of its little worth.

"I see you have not waited for me to present you, Grace," said Major Creswick, joining them.

The girls turned quickly, Maud extremely pale and trembling visibly, while Irene crimsoned. And how she hated herself for those blushes!

"It is long since we met," resumed the major, clasping the hand of Miss Emerson, and earnestly gazing on the features he had so long admired.

"It is so long since we met!"

The words were nothing in themselves, but might convey a volume of meaning if spoken by one whose heart went with them; but uttered as they were now, they struck despair to the breast of her who loved so well, who had hoped against hope, and trusted despite all reason.

Alas! Maud's day-dreams vanished like dew-drops swept from off a flower; and when she looked again into his eyes, she too plainly read that love for her was not there.

It was no fault of Major Creswick's if a beautiful girl had given her heart to him unsought. He cared not for it; he knew not of it, and would have regretted the fact if he had known it.

So Maud stifled every throb that might have brought a flush to her cheek, and calmly conversed with him. Yet it was a hard task to be in torture and seem so gay; to tear from her heart the thought that had illumined her path, had cheered her solitude, that until now had been the great hope of her existence; to feel that she had been rearing up a fabric of her own imagining, which now crumbled to dust.

Her brain was on a rack, until at last, as she turned, her look fell on Jasper Warrington.

He joined her in a second, noticing that he was welcomed with a smile, and that she made a gesture of relief at his presence; so bowing to Grace, she accepted his proffered arm, and moved haughtily away.

Major Creswick was astonished.

Why had she so summarily dismissed him, her old friend? How had he given her offense?

As he asked himself this, a soft hand stole into his, and his sister's voice whispered, "Dear Frank, I am weary. Will you return home with me soon?"

"What!" said Frank, "is the sprightly Grace tired of her second ball at the early hour of three? What say you to that, Mrs. Huntley?"

"I say that all people who go out six nights in a week ought to follow her example."

"I am to call on Mrs. Kirwan with you tomorrow," said Grace, glancing at Irene, who looked well pleased.

"Oh, I see; an arrangement between you both—conspiracy in the camp."

He held Irene's hand longer than was necessary in saying good-night, then he drew his sister's within his arm, and led her away.

"Francis," said Grace, as the carriage started homeward and he settled the rugs about her feet—"Francis, I am relieved of a weight that lay heavily upon my heart all the early part of this night. Do not smile, for I am more thoughtful than you fancy; and rejoice that you are so indifferent to that beautiful statue as I now believe you to be."

"Still harping on the old subject of the likeness," laughed the major; "but shall I show you a more beautiful picture still?"

"Yes," she answered; "provided it be not my own face in a looking-glass."

"Vanity of vanities!" returned Frank, gazing on the sweet countenance before him. "No, dear; not your features, though they are very

lovely, but a miniature of one rich in every charm except gold!"

"Do you think wealth a charm, then?"

"Yes. Why not? My father does!"

"Poor papa!" said Grace. "If every one valued it as little, there would be more happiness in the world, I think. But the likeness, Frank; it is of a stranger. Shall I ever see the original?"

"Perhaps yes; perhaps no."

"That is vague, indeed! But you are sad now, my brother."

"Well, I shall laugh again to please you."

"No; that is forced gayety, and I do not like it. There is something about that picture to make you sad."

"Yes, Grace; because it is so vague."

"Which—the picture?"

"You will know when you see it, dear."

"But when shall that be?"

"When? I don't know; perhaps to-morrow."

"No, to-night; else I could not rest. But here we are, at home! I am so glad!"

She ran up the staircase to her own room, and taking a silver lamp from the maid's hand, dismissed her.

"Poor Frank!" she thought; "I knew he had some secret trouble. Yet what can it be? If he loves, why should it be in sorrow? Surely, to him, it must be a glory and a joy, for he could never love in vain. What is it? Who is it? Thank Heaven not that haughty beauty of to-night's ball-room! Who is it? I must see the picture this night—now, this instant!" She was advancing to the door, when, suddenly stopping, she exclaimed, aloud, "Oh, I understand his sorrow now. I had forgotten his betrothal to Jane Crompton."

She listened in the corridor, where all was still; then, shading the lamp, lest she should disturb her parent, whose apartment she had to pass, made her way to her brother's. The door was fast, but not locked, so she tapped; and not receiving a reply, went in quietly.

Frank's head was bowed on one hand, while the other rested on a table, near which he sat, holding an ivory case. His eyes were riveted upon it so intently that he did not perceive his sister until she leaned over him, not to look upon the case, however, for she placed her hand between it and her sight, but to press her lips upon his forehead, thus silently assuring him of her sympathy.

He started, shutting the clasp hastily, and drawing her to a seat beside him, placed the case in her hand, which trembled as she unfastened the spring. Was it a face that she had seen before, or was it a stranger's? She opened it, her eyes turned upon the features, and an exclamation escaped her lips.

She had seen that face for the first time to-night.

"Irene!" she murmured, gladly.

"Yes; Irene, my lost love!"

"How lost? She must return your devotion. What woman would not?"

"Flatterer! You forget that I am in honor bound!"

"Jane Crompton shall not stand between you!"

"My affianced!"

"Father will release you from that engagement."

"He could not, even if he would," returned Francis. "And now, Grace, that your curiosity has been gratified by a peep at my picture, you must retire. You look more jaded than ever, and some one will be calling me to account for the roses he will miss to-morrow."

"I do feel tired," said Grace, while the blushes on her cheeks seemed to belie her words. "But, ah, Frank! how can I sleep when you are thus? Does not that thoughtful brow of yours betray a mind but ill at ease?"

"I am agitated and unhappy," he answered, "which you cannot lessen or amend; so think no more about me, sister, but go to your room. Good-night!"

"I cannot leave you yet," she murmured.

"Tell me more about the picture. Where did you get it?"

"It is a sketch from memory, painted by my own hand, and sadly deficient in expression and coloring, as you can judge for yourself."

"She is the most charming girl I ever met."

"Thank you, dear. Good-night!"

If Maud had got a glimpse of that miniature, she would have found it in her heart to wish that the lovely head on which she gazed that night could never rise again with life from the pillow where it lay so quietly.

It was late next morning when Miss Emerson stood beside her still sleeping sister; and, placing her hand on the coverlet, said:

"I have some news to tell you. Wake up!—such news!"

In an instant Irene was sitting up in bed, looking at Maud's excited features in amazement.

"I trust the news is good," she said.

"Yes," added the elder girl, with a wild look in her eyes; "good and brilliant. Oh, so good and brilliant!"

"What is it! Major Creswick, perhaps, has—"

"No; not that!—not that!" almost screamed Maud. "I am to be married in the summer. How funny!"

"Are you mad?" said Irene, rising and dressing hastily. "Married, and not to him?"

"No; not to him—not to Creswick, whom I never cared for. No; I shall be a millionaire's wife when I marry! How brilliant!—how fashionable!"

She laughed strangely as she spoke; and it was some time before Irene could understand from her incoherent explanation that Jasper Warrington had formally proposed for her hand through the medium of the post that morning.

Mr. and Mrs. Kirwan were well pleased at the account which greeted them at luncheon; and when the holidays were over did their utmost to induce Irene to stay with them. But Irene was steadfast to her first friends, and returned to the Rectory and her little school, to await the summer and Maud's marriage.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO LOVE, HONOR AND OBEY.

If Irene Emerson had entertained any misgivings of Maud's happiness, her present conduct and a close observance of Mr. Warrington, baffled them so completely that she was astonished how a suspicion of her sister's continued attachment to Major Creswick had ever entered her mind; for, dazzled by her brilliant future, Maud appeared entirely different from the discontented being who had once cast a gloom over the humble dwelling, of which the great man had never heard, for meeting Miss Emerson first in the family of Mr. Kirwan, then at Mrs. Crompton's, he had not thought it necessary either to inquire into her circumstances or to learn more about her than that she was the daughter of a gentleman whose standing in society he knew by repute, and that he loved her.

Mrs. Huntley proposed that the ceremony should take place at her house, she being the oldest friend of the bride, and this proposition was warmly acquiesced in by Maud.

Mr. Warrington, although a votary of fashion, was above its slavery.

He was very rich, and had no tie or kindred to claim a right to property at his death, which enhanced his value in the matrimonial market considerably. Generous and unspoiled by the world or the adulation that ever hovers about the wealthy, he was proud of his imagined conquest over the heart of a young beauty, on whom he lavished the most costly presents; and Maud bade fair to become what many wives of young husbands would exchange their lot for—"an old man's darling."

But appearance deceives, for Maud was still smarting under the shock of Major Creswick's

indifference, and wounded by the disappointment of a slighted passion.

She accepted Warrington's homage with a passiveness that grieved Irene to witness. Still, Miss Emerson was apparently happy, and never wavered for a second in her purpose of making the best of her future husband's fortune.

She experienced one disappointment on her wedding morning, and that was the non-appearance of Grace Creswick, who was confined to her room by a severe cold.

Why such a trifling incident should ruffle the temper of the bride was a mystery to Irene, who never suspected that the proud girl had set her heart on displaying her brilliant fortune not only to the major, but his sister.

The remainder of the guests were assembled and an avenue of expectant faces was opened to receive the bride among them. At last a footstep descended the stairs, and many eyes turned eagerly toward the door, while a young girl in a pale blue silk entered and smilingly greeted the assembly.

Very beautiful, very fascinating she was. Even the bride was forgotten in the admiration Irene excited. But a crowd of gentlemen took their places by the door, and Irene pressed back until she stood beside a tall figure near the mantle-piece—it was Major Creswick. She perceived the sudden pallor of his face after meeting her, and felt a deeper interest than she had done before in wondering to herself if this could be a fatal mistake, after all. What if Maud had acted too hastily in accepting her present position, by which she might have thrown aside a love once coveted? Yes, it must be so. See how his lip trembles as he returns a bow of recognition from her who is so near a relative of the as yet Miss Emerson, how his voice falters when he addresses her!

What will she do?—how act? Should she fly to the bride and forbid these unnatural nuptials? No; it is too late, for Maud enters, followed by Mrs. Huntley, as calm and self-possessed as ever.

Irene turns from her with a shudder at what she fears to be her loveless condition, then looks again upon the young soldier. Their eyes meet, timidly, eagerly, wistfully, while the blood mounts to the brows of both.

Murmurs of admiration follow Maud, but she has no time to listen, for she hurries to the church, where the bridegroom awaits impatiently—impatient to call the splendid creature all his own. They kneel, and the fatal ceremony begins, while, distinct and slowly, the minister pronounces those solemn words which fall, alas! too frequently upon unheeding ears, and are often as meaningless as they are now to her who kneels so proudly, with a falsehood on her lip, repeating the sacred vow, which, once over, is forgotten in the congratulations which gather fast about her.

Irene turns to mark if Major Creswick will offer his, and finds that he is one of the first to do so. He advanced to the veiled figure with a calm but kindly look, and she heard his voice speak the unceremonious words as steadily as if they were spoken to a stranger.

But Maud passes abruptly from him, and Francis did not see the expression on her face, which the veil concealed, or he would not be so light of heart as he made his way to the side of Irene.

It was not a very joyous wedding, after all, for an uncomfortable restraint had taken possession of the guests, which lasted until the bride and groom drove off in their splendid vehicle, as the first move on their wedding tour. Then a cloud seemed to have been removed from the fashionable atmosphere; and the gentlemen grew merry after the *dejeuner*, and the ladies coquetted prettily with those whom they thought worthy of the honor.

Irene and Major Creswick had often met before, but never at a meeting like the present, where she saw him in a new light. Although esteeming him always, he never appeared to such advantage as on the day of Maud's nuptials, where he seemed to be beloved and re-

spected by all who knew him. If a thought of the young soldier's love had ever before entered a heart endeavoring to be faithful to a sister, it was dismissed as a sacrilege; but that night, when the head of Irene pressed a sleepless pillow, it was with the conviction of a long-dreaded truth.

She asked herself the reason of her joy at her sister's marriage, or what was the cause of the rapturous delight that shot like ray from heaven into her soul when she remarked Francis Creswick's calm indifference as to the choice of Maud.

Did she love him herself? At the answer to her own question she blushed—because she knew she had given her heart unsought.

CHAPTER IX.

A HONEYMOON.

JASPER WARRINGTON, proud of his young wife, lost no opportunity in gratifying her extravagant tastes and exacting wishes; yet Maud scorned his love.

Much to her chagrin, they were obliged to visit Canada relative to the disposal of some property before they started for Washington, where Mr. Warrington owned a most costly and elegant residence, and where he would bring his beautiful bride to pass their honeymoon. They would spend the season there, and Maud would be the queen of society—could drink to the brim of the cup of flattery and adulation. Then they would return to their New York home and settle down, and have their friends and relatives around them. Maud should have her sister to live with her, and everything would be so happy. So thought the indulgent bridegroom, little dreaming of what in the future really was in store for them.

After transacting the business which called him to Canada, Mr. Warrington took his wife to the Thousand Isles, thinking she could not but enjoy the bracing air, magnificent scenery and novelty. But Maud was strangely unenthusiastic—so much so that her husband would often look on her in silent wonder, conjuring his brain with speculations as to what could be the matter. Then perhaps her mood would change, and she would again become the gay, fascinating girl who had first attracted his imagination.

They had been at the Islands for about a week when one day Mr. Warrington, as they were returning toward their hotel, stopped at the post-office, where he observed a fashionable-looking gentleman asking for letters. Something about the stranger's appearance so attracted him that, forgetting the usages of society, he stared long and almost rudely, until the other, looking up from the missive he had been perusing, their glances met, and Mr. Warrington turned in some confusion to inquire for his letters.

Scarcely had he mentioned his name when the stranger left abruptly, and the next moment was standing at the carriage-door, talking familiarly with Mrs. Warrington.

"Major Creswick!" he heard her say; "who could have thought of meeting you here?"

Major Creswick! He did not remember hearing of him before, and again scrutinized the countenance of the gentleman with redoubled interest.

He pocketed his letters without opening one of them, and joined his wife with a slightly troubled brow.

A formal introduction took place, and, after a lively conversation, during which the major mentioned that he was merely on a pleasure excursion with some friends, each took a laughing adieu, and the carriage drove away.

"My dear," remarked Jasper, "I had never seen that young man before."

"Yes, often. You met him at Mrs. Huntley's and at Mrs. Crompton's also."

"Never, my dear. I am quite sure I could not forget such a fine face as his."

Mrs. Warrington smiled at her husband's obstinacy, but did not deem the matter worthy discussion, or, perhaps, guessed something of the truth—that he had been too enamored of

her beauty to take notice of any man's countenance at the time they spoke of.

That evening Mrs. Warrington startled her husband by another change of plans. On this enchanting island her ladyship's humor changed from sou'-east to nor'-east. She declared herself weary of the whole place, and that she would start for New York on the ensuing day.

So the dutiful husband digested his mortification at this announcement as he digested his dinner—in obedient silence; and thus this most beautiful spot, a casket filled with nature's gems, was thrust aside, not half looked over or appreciated, as many other delightful places were destined to be by the restless, miserable bride of the millionaire.

Arriving in New York, Maud longed, in what she thought her weakness, to see Irene, but put the desire from her and started for Washington on the following morning; and there was not a throb of regret in her breast for those she left behind—except, perhaps, for one—for Francis Creswick, the sound of whose name she fled from as delicious poison.

Meanwhile, Irene had returned to her trust, where Mrs. Veitcher, headed by the pupils, whose eagerness to be first was uncontrollable, welcomed her back with delight; and so things continued to go on smoothly enough until one day Major Creswick and his sister stood in the midst of her astonished pupils. She felt her hand clasped in his, and a throb of rapturous joy leap to her heart, but she concealed it all.

Irene smilingly told her visitors that they had startled her little flock, and led the way to another apartment; but Grace, declared that the garden, looking so tempting through the glass door at the end of the little hall, was irresistible, and proposed adjourning thither—an arrangement gladly acquiesced in by the daughter of Major Emerson, who congratulated herself on the escape of her shabby little sitting-room.

At the end of the garden was Irene's favorite retreat—a romantic-looking summer-house, covered inside with moss and shells; and to this they went, while some of the children made themselves busy in gathering fruit and placing it on a green table before them.

"This is positively delightful," cried Grace.

"Enchanting," laughed Francis.

And so the conversation flowed freely on between the happy trio—that is, as long as Grace bore the burden of it; but when she desisted, the other two became conscious of restraint, and were silent.

"These are very fine," resumed Francis, studying a strawberry as closely as if he had never seen a specimen of the kind before.

"Yes; and flourishes splendidly in this little garden," answered Irene, with wonderful interest.

"Those school duties of yours are very arduous," said Grace, honestly speaking her thoughts.

"I am very fond of my pupils, and they do not give me as much trouble as one might suppose."

"I shall go and make acquaintance with them if you have no objection, Miss Emerson." Grace rose, and Irene was about to follow her, when she was laughingly forbidden. "Please let me introduce myself; children and I get along very well together. Do you stay and talk to Francis."

This was a terrible situation for Irene. If the major had been a savage from the Cannibal Islands, she could not have been more frightened. Fortunately her work was in her apron-pocket—a beautifully embroidered hand screen—and in this she took refuge; but she found herself cross-stitching a delicate rose-leaf with black sewing-silk. She looked up to see if her awkwardness was detected, and encountered the dark, earnest eyes of her companion fastened inquiringly upon her.

"You don't ask me how your sister is looking," he said, abruptly.

"Maud! Have you seen her? Where?—how?"

"Oh, you are roused to interest at last. I saw Mrs. Warrington at the Thousands Isles, where I went with some friends of Mrs. Crompton's. She was looking charming, but rather wearied, I thought."

"Poor Maud!"

"Rich Maud, you mean—one of the richest women in New York; but I did not come here to talk about her. I came on quite another matter."

Irene dropped a skein of silk, which Francis picked up and began twisting to its utter destruction, both looking very silly, it must be confessed.

Irene spread her work on her lap to examine a rose-bud. Her hand was imprisoned, and the young man's voice was trembling as he said, "Irene, dearest Irene, you know what brought me here. Oh, I have so much to say—so much to explain! You must know that I loved you all along; but you do not know how deeply and with what sincerity. I am wrong, perhaps, in telling you this; but I cannot help it. I can keep silent no longer, situated as I am. I am acting almost like a madman; but you will forgive me. I love you, yet I dare not ask you to be my wife. I love you, and we are separated by a wider space than land or ocean could devise. Ah, Irene! I would not have told you this if I could have helped it; but my silent worship was preying so heavily on my heart, that I listened only to my own selfish passion, which prompted me to come here to-day and tell you everything."

His voice faltered, and he looked into her face. It was glowing with a new light, was radiant with the unspeakable bliss of feeling herself beloved by him by whom alone of all others she desired to be loved.

"You are not angry," he continued—"Irene, you are not angry? Speak even one word, and tell me that you forgive my selfish and exacting conduct."

"Not that, not that," she murmured. "I can but feel what your lips have uttered—that you love me!"

She stopped, and there was a short but rapturous silence, during which her head bent until it rested on his shoulder.

"And you love me, Irene—do you love me?"

He faltered out the question, and waited for a reply, but it came not, for in that mute act of confidence he was already answered.

Yes, she loved him, or she had not been thus; neither would she have listened to every word that had fallen from his lips as though each tone had sounded in her heart with a strange a delightful music.

Yes, she loved him, and alas! he was bound by every tie of honor to another. He told her all; he explained the compact that had been entered into relative to engagements, settlements, etc., between Jane Crompton's father and his own. It was a bitter trial; an ordeal in which the woman proved the stronger.

When Grace again joined them, her brother felt a hopeless sorrow, because he feared he was now to take a final leave of her he loved so truly, and Grace was not long in detecting how matters stood, but wisely kept her own counsels.

Francis went away from Irene, determined never to grieve his aged father by any dishonorable conduct of his own; he was gone to keep his promise to his plighted bride, which brave Irene urged him to do.

That he loved her was enough of happiness to illumine the present; more she thought not of.

CHAPTER X.

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

FAR off in her beautiful home a simple, loving letter brought Mrs. Warrington tidings of her sister's happiness; of Irene receiving that place for which she would have been willing to renounce all the pomp and show of her present grandeur.

Their correspondence had been regular, and Irene, following the old habit of disguising

nothing from Maud, told all that had occurred in that momentous visit.

Mrs. Warrington did her best that day to forget the contents of that unwelcome letter, and went on her way, admired, flattered, and envied, but many persons wondered why the beautiful Northern belle looked so much more statuesque than usual.

Hiding the tumult of envy and revenge which was raging in her bosom, Mrs. Warrington informed her husband of her determination to leave Washington and return to New York.

"But, my dear," suggested he, "now that the season is at its height, and you the center of attraction, would it not be better to remain until it slackens a little? Besides, you have not seen enough of those foreign ambassadors with whom you once seemed so anxious to be acquainted."

"I don't choose to prolong my stay," Maud said, looking up at the gentleman with an unmistakable expression of "How dare you question my will, sir?"

Mr. Warrington was wisely silent.

"She is whimsical as the weathercock," he mused, as he watched her placidly bending over a book where she was seated near the window. "Not more than two days since she expressed herself delighted with Washington and its society, and now, forsooth, we are to bundle North without having had our visit to Florida, or any place else. Of one thing I am glad—that we shall escape the abomination of any sea-traveling; that is, if she does not regret having left those scenes after her, for then she will give me marching orders to bundle back again. Heigho! Well, it is hard to deny her anything, so young, so bewitching as she is. How I am envied in the possession of such a wife! And how she snubs those young fellows, who doubtless believe the old husband jealous of their attentions! No, I could not disappoint her—never."

"My dear," he said, after revolving all these thoughts in his mind, "your will is my law, and we shall return to New York when it is your pleasure."

"Thank you, Jasper," she replied, without looking up from her book.

The gentleman coughed dryly, for, faultless as he imagined his wife to be, he would gladly have had a little warmth in her manner, which seemed more like indifference than gratification at his acquiescence.

She went on quietly reading for half an hour, and then as quietly left the apartment.

Having given her maid directions to pack her jewels in a traveling case which she pointed out, Maud cast a short glance upon a magnificent set of diamonds, her husband's latest gift, and felt that for such booty she had not only bartered her peace of mind, but sold herself to one whose noble nature alone kept her from abhorring him.

Within the security of her own chamber her ladyship's calmness deserted her, and pacing the floor, she gave herself up to bitter thoughts.

"For what reason am I returning to the scene of her happiness? What urges me back with a power I have no strength to resist? Oh, that my husband had held out against me—had for once thwarted my wishes, had kept me back from the abyss into which I feel myself tottering since I heard of that fatal love confession! It would be better, wiser, to fly to the furthest part of the earth, that a greater distance might be between us. Could Irene really have fathomed the secret of my idolatry for that cold and senseless idol, while winning him for herself?"

As she asked herself this question her features were distorted by evil passion.

"No," she reasoned to herself, as she grew calmer, "she has not the spirit to scheme for herself, nor the tact to read the feelings that my pride concealed. Fool—fool, that you are, Francis Creswick, to put aside my passionate devotion for her puny preference! She could never love as I loved you—as still I love, for

at this moment you are dearer to me than life and honor!"

Weeping hysterically, she exclaimed: "Oh, save me from temptation!" But her heart more fervently pleaded, "Grant me revenge!"

But she stood before a mirror, twisting the massive bracelets round and round on her slender wrists.

"Why,"—she continued—"oh! why did he prefer her, when this head has been the model of America's greatest sculptor—these features transferred to canvas as the most perfect that ever came before an artist! I am surrounded by worshipers—why did he not feel a spark of admiration of this glorious beauty? I could have fanned that spark into a very flame of love by the fervor of my own heart; but he shut out the vision of my charms to pay homage at another shrine, and now both, both shall feel that the pallid girl, so calm and quiet in her sorrow, has still life and energy sufficient to rouse her crushed spirit, and sting most sharply where she herself has been most deeply stung."

Maud turned from the mirror with a gesture of impatience, and unlocking a cabinet for the purpose of thrusting away some jewels that lay upon the toilet since the previous night, she started back with a low cry the moment the lid flew open.

Lying on its velvet cushion was a simple bit of ivory, from whose surface three pair of eyes looked out upon her with life-like vividness. It was a group that had been painted a few months before her father's death. There was Irene, her young sister, with her sunny smile and rippling hair, her tiny hand clasped in that of the darkly-beautiful Maud, who stood beside her. Both looked almost childish—so happy, so trusting. No revengeful thought had come to mar the serene features of that grave brunette. No cloud of sorrow had then passed over the head of that sweet blonde; and the noble figure of Major Emerson, partially leaning over the chair on which they were seated, was strongly defined in the background, and seemed to look out with a sad reproach to meet the eyes now riveted upon it.

"And thus I was once," she murmured, passing her fingers over the features of the dark girl, "so innocent and loving. How often since has this hand been clasped in hers with the same affection that then beamed on her countenance? May Heaven forgive me for the cruel thoughts which possessed me toward her! Oh, my father, would that those mute lips could chide me from the senseless ivory, that I might crave the pardon you so often accorded to my willful childhood! No, I would not harm her if I could; and badly as I have used your memory in neglecting the child of your best love, I promise now that I will do her no further ill."

Pressing her hand against the cold miniature, the miserable woman sunk beside the cabinet powerless and weeping bitterly. When she awoke to consciousness she was lying on a couch in a state of complete exhaustion. She saw her husband sitting beside her, but too weak to make any effort at conversation, she closed her eyes and fell into a heavy slumber. It was nearly midnight when she again looked round, and found him still in the same place, almost in the same attitude, and her heart smote her that she was so unworthy of his affection. She raised her head higher on the pillows, and saw, by the muffled light of a silver lamp, the cabinet opened as she had left it, with the miniature still lying on its velvet cushion. A little further off were one or two trunks, strapped and ready for the journey.

"You have been very ill, darling," said Jasper, bending over her.

"I—have I?" she replied. "No, only a passing weakness. See, I am quite well now." She endeavored to rise, but finding herself unable to do so, added, "Have I fainted? how long have I been thus?"

"A long time—for hours," he said. "We could not recall you to consciousness for what seemed to me an age."

"Nay, my lady," said her maid, stepping forward, "your swoon did not continue for such a length as master imagined. You first would faint and come to, and faint again for about two hours, that is all."

For a whole month Maud lay upon a sick-bed, suffering from intermittent fever, while all that wealth and love could do to alleviate her sufferings was lavished upon her, until at last she was pronounced out of danger.

When Maud was able to recline upon an easy couch, her husband's greatest happiness was to win a smile of thanks from her pallid lips, after he had read to her till he was hoarse or had otherwise endeavored to amuse her. Thus days went on, but still she continued weak and dispirited, yet endeavored not to appear ungrateful to Jasper, whose every act of kindness augmented her secret misery, until, seeing no other remedy so available, her medical attendants advised an immediate removal, back to the North and her friends.

Thus warned, Jasper, for the first during his wedded bliss, did not consult the wishes of his wife; but acted as he thought proper, regardless of that and every other obstacle.

The invalid, knowing what was going forward, felt like one who was driven to some horrible fate by an unseen agency, over which she had no control; and when her husband lingered beside her, with no prying menial nigh, she urged him tearfully, but vainly, to renounce his purpose, and take her to some other country, leaving it to his own option, no matter how tedious the journey might be, so that she were not forced to New York; but treating this as the caprice of a most capricious invalid, Jasper was inexorable.

"Oh, keep me from temptation—keep me from temptation!" Maud prayed silently, as she looked upon the preparations going forward in carrying out her husband's directions.

CHAPTER XI.

MAUD'S CONFESSION.

A WEEK after the physician's mandate, Jasper stood at the window of his Washington house, looking at the removal of some valuable bric-a-brac.

"There they go," he said. "Quietly, lads. It is a heavy burden; but all will be safe since my faithful Blanchard is with them. Is he not a surly-looking fellow, with his great brows and heavy lips? Just like my old bloodhound, Tramp, who is as faithful as he is morose."

"Like him in appearance, certainly," answered his wife; "but I confess I never thought much of your valet; his eyes never yet met mine with an honest, open look. Poor Tramp, he cannot beautify his shaggy coat except by his proofs of devotion."

"Which are many," added Jasper; "and perhaps Blanchard will yet manage to beautify himself in your opinion by his steady habits and faithful services to me. You know in most cases he acts as my secretary, and I have never known him to take advantage of his trust in any way."

"He is certainly much attached to you, Jasper, and it would be strange were it otherwise, for what kinder or more indulgent master could a servant have than you always prove yourself to be."

"My darling," murmured he in return, taking one of her thin hands and pressing it to his lips, "my beautiful Maud, it is very good of you to say so. If I were a kind master to them, am I a good husband to you? Yes? Well, then, why cannot I make you more content, more cheerful, darling? Would that I could see you happy!"

He bent over her, and she laid her head upon his shoulder, her cheeks wet with tears that she almost unconsciously was shedding.

"Had you not better rest until the moment of our departure?" he urged. "You are weak and tired; but when you have had an hour's repose you will feel stronger."

He arranged the pillows, and in a short time

saw her in a deep sleep, after which the effects of her excitement vanished, and, having taken some refreshments, they bade farewell to Washington never more to return to it.

Mrs. Warrington, who without regret had parted from home, looked out from her carriage window to view for the last time the scene of her many triumphs. She did so with a feeling as new as it was unaccountable to herself, until her attention was awakened by her husband remarking that her look bespoke something like regret for her departure.

"Not only because I depart," she said, "but because I am returning to my former home."

"In that, as in everything else," he observed, "you are not like other people, which, perhaps, is the charm that most endears you to me. You are an original, and that to a man like me is a never failing source of interest. There are few who do not return to their home with renewed pleasure, after months of travel. When first I left my country, buoyant and happy in the prospect of a pleasant tour, well supplied with funds and with gay companions, before our intended circuit had been half performed, there was not one, including myself, who had not become so homesick that we retraced our footsteps; and never shall I forget the thrill of happiness that warmed my breast the first moment my sight fell again upon my old home."

"Yet you have traveled so much, and so often crossed the ocean?" urged his wife.

"Yes; in my young days."

Mrs. Warrington made no reply, but sighing deeply, leaned back upon the pillows.

They were traveling by short, easy stages. Fatigue was as much as possible spared the invalid, and she found herself at her journey's end without once having felt that fatigue which is the terror of invalids. But in this Maud also was not like most people, and the night of their arrival in New York, when seated in the drawing-room of her own magnificent mansion, she expressed regret at having reached her journey's end.

"You are improved by the change already, dear," said her husband. "As for me, I hope never again to encounter such a trip."

"You did not dislike it when you were going?"

"I was a bridegroom then."

"Which means that you were happier?"

"Yes, Maud," said he, seriously; "for then I hoped that my untiring devotion might, some time win, if not your love, at least your affection; but now gratitude, for what you call my kindness, and a cold regard is all that I receive from you."

"You wrong me—indeed you wrong me!" said Maud. "True, I am cold, for such is my nature; but gratitude, once awakened toward the only being on earth who ever loved me, soon ripened into affection as warm as it is sincere, but which you never seemed to believe in."

Jasper would have clasped her in his arms, so great was his rapture at these words.

"Stay," she said; "you do not know—you could not guess that at the moment I became your wife my heart was wasting itself upon another. Nay, do not shrink away; bear with me while yet I have courage to reveal all to you. I loved where my love was unwelcome, yet I believed that, when once I became yours, I could conquer my feelings, and I thought I had succeeded until a short time before we left Washington."

"Before we left Washington?" repeated her astonished husband, shading her eyes with his trembling hand.

"Yes," went on Maud. "When hearing of his love for another, I determined to return for the purpose of poisoning his mind against her, his chosen one; or, in fact, to take any revenge I could. Alas! then I knew that I loved him still."

"Oh, Maud, stop! I cannot listen to this."

"You must. My illness succeeded; a veil seemed to be torn from my eyes, and I repented of the wrong I had contemplated; while now—now I turn to the comfort and sup-

port of your love, as all that I on earth desire."

"And it shall never fail you!" he murmured.

But Jasper knew she was reserved even in this confession, and unconscious though he was of his rival's name, he did not venture to agitate her further by what to both was a painful subject; but it had been better for his and her peace that this very tenderness had not raised up a bar between them.

"And now, dear," he added, "I shall leave you, for you look ill and weary."

He spread a velvet wrap over her, and kissing her forehead, left her.

Then starting from the couch, she stood in the center of the room with flashing eyes.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "why did I confess my hateful meanness—mine, whom he believed had no such failing! Now he knows me as I am—a spiritless creature, his wife, yet loving another, and that other, one who scorned me. Oh, had I the power to crush you, Francis, make your proud spirit bow to mine, to win your love from Irene, if only for one hour!—then I could return scorn for scorn, and lay the reward of my triumph at my husband's feet, my self-esteem thus proving to him that I was not unworthy of his trust nor of the name I bear!"

CHAPTER XII.

FREE AT LAST.

JASPER WARRINGTON, alarmed at his wife not regaining health on her return to her native air, called in his own physician, in whom he felt the utmost confidence. He had ceased to consult the invalid, sparing her every effort of thought, and in this instance he pursued entirely his own judgment.

The physician, looking somewhat puzzled, or rather pretending to do so, for he did not care to encounter too close an examination from his old friend about this young wife, whose case was critical, recommended extreme quiet, time, and patience. He would not acknowledge that he had detected heart-disease in the beautiful young woman whom he secretly condemned Mr. Warrington for marrying.

Under this gentleman's care Maud improved, but with returning health, the strength of an ill-governed mind was again aroused, and she felt determined to do or dare anything for vengeance. She knew that Major Creswick had never treated her dishonorably, nor in the slightest had he encouraged her passion, but she loved him, and he dared to bestow all the treasure of his heart upon another. In that lay not her own folly, but his crime; not his truth but her wrong, a wrong for which the demon that possessed her now called loudly for atonement.

Mrs. Warrington was fast becoming an enigma to herself. Throughout her recent illness she had struggled to overcome the evil feelings which had taken possession of her from the moment she had received Irene's last letter in Washington. At one time she would vow vengeance for her imagined wrongs, and the next moment weep that she had meditated such wickedness. She had fallen into a bitter reverie.

Mr. Warrington, his voice quivering with emotion, startled her by saying, "You are weary of your old husband; he who loves and trusts you so completely."

"You are too kind, too good to me, Jasper," she returned, with agitation. "Shall I order luncheon? And as the rain is clearing off we can take a walk if you like, for I confess I am rather dull; or shall I stay with you here?"

"Stay with me, my precious, and the evil foreboding that has haunted me for the past week will melt like the snow before the sunshine!"

"Foreboding of what? You surely are not superstitious? Why, Jasper, how pale you are! What is the matter? Are you ill?"

She had flown to his side, her arms were around him, and her lips were pressed to his. Were these the actions of a faithless wife? He

believed not, and with a strong effort recovered his composure.

"My dearest, what a silly old fool I am to scare you thus!" Then rising, and parting the hair on her forehead, gazed at her tenderly, as he continued, "I dreamed last night that you were dead—dead to me, at least; that I saw you trembling on the edge of a precipice; and—and— But it was only a dream, my love!"

A week after her visit to Irene Emerson, Grace made up her mind that, at any risk, she would confess to her father all about the young people's attachment. She admired and liked Irene, adored her brother; and Miss Creswick was not one to shrink from doing what she thought was right.

Old Mr. Creswick had returned to his chamber, and was seated, wrapped up in his fur dressing-gown, on an easy-chair by the fire. A gentle tap came to the door, and he stretched forth his arms to receive his favorite child within them.

"Papa," said Grace, "I have come for my good-night kiss."

"You have had it already."

"Yes; but I want another now," said Miss Creswick, drawing a low footstool to her father's side, and seating herself upon it. "Father," she continued, "I never yet have asked a favor of you in vain. I do believe you could not refuse me anything consistent with honor and principle."

"I could not, my child."

"Father, has it never occurred to you that Frank is far from happy in the engagement which others have forced upon him?"

"Grace, Grace!" cried Mr. Creswick, endeavoring to hide a covert smile in a semblance of sternness; "you are speaking at random, child, and needlessly alarming me. Francis is willing to fulfill his plighted word. The good lad who never yet caused me a moment's pain will not do so now. Listen, here is his footstep. He, too, comes to wish me good-night. Bless him—bless you both, my children!"

"Not asleep, sir?" remarked Francis, entering. "But what is this? Grace in tears? Sister, you have broken faith with me. I read it on my father's brow. I see it in your downcast looks. Is this your promise?"

"She has told me but little," said Mr. Creswick, gravely. "Speak for yourself, Francis, and fear not to reveal the truth; but if it be relative to your engagement with Jane Crompton, you know my word is passed."

"I know it, sir, and am prepared to do as you would have me."

"Oh, dear father!" cried Grace, "do not heed him. You do not know the struggles he has had. It will out, although he bound me by a promise not to reveal the secret of his love for another; but I cannot be silent. Father, if this marriage be insisted on, it will be to the destruction of your son's well-being."

The old man raised his handkerchief to his face like a person in extreme agitation. Yet if their minds had not been so preoccupied, they might have found him laughing slyly behind it.

"Foolish girl!" he said at length. "Your affection for your brother has proved stronger than your rectitude." Then addressing Francis, who had turned from what he thought was his father's grief, the old man added, in the same grave tone: "What say you for yourself, my son? Shall your father's word be forfeited, for, it may be, a blind passion for an unworthy object?"

"Never, sir, never! Best and kindest that you have ever been to me, the greatest sacrifice in my power would be but a poor acknowledgment of all I owe you."

Turning to Grace, her father opened his arms and, half-astonished, she sprung into them.

"Generous heart," he murmured, "ever willing to pain itself for other's weal. I have tried you both, my children. One was want-

ing, and the other has proved all that I believed he would be. But you are forgiven, dear, on condition that you never break faith with—"

Grace placed her hand over his lips, as a vivid blush mounted to her brow, for she knew he meant her betrothed husband.

"Father," she said, "what does this mean? Something has occurred to release you and Francis from what has lately been distasteful even to yourself?"

"Nothing has occurred, except that Francis has been simply jilted by his bride-elect, who no doubt has made a better choice, and as the wife of a fashionable but used-up youth has forgotten her tardy betrothed. Here is a newspaper with an account of bridesmaids' dress and all the rest of it; and here a letter from her mother, begging our pardon in the most finished style of a woman of the world."

"Why have you not told us of this before, sir?" asked Francis, joyously.

"Because I only received the tidings myself to-day, and as I saw, from sundry signs and tokens, that the tie I had formed was fettering and worrying you— In a word, boy, I tested your obedience, and proved the fragility of a woman's vow, which shall be duly reported to—"

Again the little hand was on his lips, and again the cheeks were rosy red.

"Now," said Mr. Creswick, pleasantly drawing his chair closer to the fire, and signing the others to a seat at either side of him, "now tell me who the divinity may be that is to supply the place of Grace as a daughter when she leaves my roof-tree."

"One whom you have not seen, sir," replied Grace; "but who is so good and beautiful that you will love her dearly. Her name is Irene Emerson."

"Irene Emerson? A pretty name."

"Francis has her likeness."

Mr. Creswick adjusted his spectacles and looked at the miniature.

"It is a noble countenance, and I shall like Irene Emerson," he said.

CHAPTER XIII.

WITHIN THE MAZE.

THE happy day was named; Irene and Francis were to be married on old Mr. Creswick's birthday. Francis would have it sooner, but as the time for obedience had not yet arrived, the bride-elect had her way. The ancient gentleman, who was deeply in love, and who had made repeated attempts to out-rival his son, was delighted at the compact, and kissed the fair one's blushing cheeks with a great deal more boldness than the would-be Benedict had ever dared to do.

They were engaged, and Grace Creswick's wish was realized. She knew now one who was worthy of her brother. Irene was that faultless personage, for, in the estimation of Miss Creswick, to be worthy of him was to be perfection.

Mrs. Veitcher insisted on Irene living at the Rectory until her marriage, and with this intention she took a final farewell of her little pupils, who, to testify their love and respect, presented her with a handsome set of jewels.

But a letter from Mrs. Warrington upset good Mrs. Veitcher's arrangements. Maud wrote, warmly congratulating Irene on her engagement, and inviting her to visit her. Indeed, the invitation was little less than a command. Maud said that her home must be her sister's until Irene's own was ready to receive her.

Irene, although sorry to part from such true friends as the rector and his wife had always been, was delighted at the prospect of living once more with Maud, so she took a tender farewell of them and many other people to whom she had endeared herself during her short stay in Chatham.

Jasper's welcome of his sister-in-law was courteous and kind in the extreme. He admired the young girl herself, and hoped great

things for Maud out of her enlivening companionship.

After dinner, in the drawing-room, the first day of her arrival, Irene looked at her sister with an earnestness that she strove in vain to hide under her usual gayety.

Was Maud happy, she wondered. She was more beautiful a Mrs. Warrington than she had ever been as Miss Emerson; but something about her now struck a chill on Irene's loving heart, and made her sad as she noted the magnificent diamonds flung on her neck and arms, certainly not so rounded as they used to be.

"Do you like my home, dear?" asked her sister, avoiding her anxious gaze by a careless glance round the spacious apartment.

"It is very grand, Maudy."

Mrs. Warrington started, then laughed.

"The old familiar name is so strange to me," she explained. "It is such a long time since I heard any one say Maudy. Go on with what you were saying—you like the room. Tomorrow I shall take you over the house, for the next day I expect it will be full of visitors. Jasper and I made up a list of those whom we considered would make a pleasant party—your intended is among them."

"Oh, how kind of you! And Grace—did you invite Grace too, Maudy?"

"You forget that I don't know much of Miss Creswick."

"But under the circumstances—I mean that as we shall shortly become one family, could you, or would it be right—I—I should so like you to invite her!"

"It is impossible—it would be a breach of etiquette; besides, I have no room for her. Our party will consist chiefly of Jasper's relatives—old-fashioned people, who seldom come to New York, and would never come at all except to oblige him. I expect our principal amusement will be cards, which the young people of course can escape from if inclined for the theater. Jasper is very fond of little tours quite in a rural way. Last week we went to Passaic Falls, and were charmed; it will bear a repetition."

"I should so love to go there! Strange that we never went during papa's time!"

"It is very beautiful."

Maud abruptly ceased speaking, for on the moment they were joined by Mr. Warrington.

It appeared to Irene that her sister did not wish her husband to know what they were conversing about; if so, the wish was frustrated.

"You were telling Irene about our day at Passaic Falls?" he said, drawing a chair near his wife.

"Oh, no! I merely said that we should take sundry little tours to places she has never seen!"

Irene grew crimson, and bent over an elaborately-bound volume of Shakespeare, wondering if her sister really intended to imply a falsehood.

"Because," continued Jasper, "if you have not, I shall!"

"I don't know what there is to tell, except that it is most charming!"

"Certainly, my love; but I forgot all the charms in fright and anxiety! Just fancy, Irene, when we got out of the carriage Maud insisted on walking such a distance along the bank of the water—below the falls, I mean, until we came to one particular spot. It was lovely enough, I must admit; but what she saw there to cause, first extreme agitation, then a death-like pallor, as if she would faint—and you know, Irene, the physicians all preach against that kind of thing—and I positively had to shake her in my arms and speak roughly to her to arouse and save her from what I dreaded! We returned home quietly enough after that, I can assure you. That was my experience of a day at Passaic Falls.

Maud laughed merrily.

"Well," she said, "your next will be a happier one. Come, Irene, run your fingers over that old grand. It's tone is perfect."

But Miss Emerson's thoughts were sad on account of Maud. She wondered if her sister was really so enchanted with her marriage as she would have every one believe.

Next day the guests arrived—all but Major Creswick, whose invitation had not so soon been sent out from the family conclave, Mr. Warrington wishing to have a few hours to devote exclusively to his relatives.

Irene felt the interval tedious indeed, for, like a true woman, she lived in her love alone, enjoying nothing and finding no pleasure in the absence of the man who henceforth was to make the fullness of her life.

He came at last, and Irene lived again.

She looked beautiful in her evening costume. Before the second dinner-bell had rung she stood before a cheval glass in wonder at her own appearance. What had worked the change? Not the dress, faultless though it was. She forgot that happiness is a great beautifier—the greatest of all, perhaps. Her eyes were as bright as the diamonds on her neck; her cheeks wore a richer blush than the roses in her hair. Yes, she was beautiful to-night, the first night of Frank's arrival, and she tripped gayly from the room, singing lightly, until she found herself on the grand staircase, where she remembered that she had to act the part of a staid, grown-up young lady about to be married, forgetting all the child and childish ways.

Mrs. Warrington had not yet left her room, although her toilet, which was even more elaborate than usual, was completed, and she had dismissed her maid. She leaned heavily on a table, looking fixedly into the mirror before her. Could she have seen into her heart as easily, she might have turned in loathing from its reflection; but she saw only her outer self, more beautiful than Irene, and smiled in triumphant gladness.

"Her happiness, should it continue, would drive me mad," she thought, while the vindictive expression on those perfect features grew more intense; "would spur me on, perhaps, to commit some crime; but I know it will not last. She trusts her lover; but no man can be trusted if greater beauty tempt him. I came too hastily to the conclusion that he did not love me, and a thousand times too hasty in accepting the hand and fortune of Mr. Warrington. I was dazzled at the splendor offered me, and lost my chance of happiness forever."

A footstep sounded in the corridor, and Mrs. Warrington turned from the table with a smile upon her lips; but the step passed on, and she seated herself calmly to think again. No one looking on that placid countenance would believe the working of that stony heart.

"I have matured my plan of action," she muttered. "Once an explanation takes place between us, he shall know me—not as the proud, cold girl who once repelled him; but as the passionate, adoring woman, who, even while she flees from him, leaves all her happiness in his keeping. He must do justice at least to the wretched being whose ambition has been her ruin. They say that 'man forgets, but woman never;' and shall I, Maud, Mrs. Warrington, be less than woman? No; time and courage shall befriend me!"

When Mrs. Warrington entered the drawing-room, her lips were gayly wreathed in smiles, and her manner was less haughty than usual. The guests, for the most part, were already assembled. She saw Irene and her lover chatting pleasantly together, and no one could detect that the pretty picture they made was hateful to their hostess.

Dinner was announced, and so the general routine of fashionable life began—dinners, balls, theaters, concerts, etc., until systematic plotting, covered by the refinement of hypocrisy, brought about a sort of rural luncheon to be partaken of at the falls. Even Mr. Warrington was thrown off his guard, and forgetting his watch over the health of his wife, agreed to the arrangement.

In all her experience of wealth and fashion, Maud never gave such attention to any entertainment as she did to this rural luncheon.

Whether it was to be rural in its real sense, or of unusual magnificence, no one knew but herself.

Maud met with only one little incident to shake her confidence in herself or in whatever she meant that little pleasure trip to be.

The night before it was to take place, Jasper lovingly drew her hand within his arm, and brought her out to the balcony. The scene was tranquil, the moon teemed in bright splendor, and gave a charm to everything, that even Mrs. Warrington, unimpressionable as she was, felt as well as saw.

"Maud," said Jasper, is there anything more calm and holy than a moonlight night, reposing in the deathlike silence of a living world? Do not those silvery beams, streaming from their azure bed, remind us of something purer and brighter even than themselves—of the unknown world beyond, where but a breath might sweep us—the space of great eternity!"

Maud did not reply; but gazing upon the lovely sky, pressed her hand upon her loudly throbbing heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LAST APPEAL.

THE bright sun of balmy, soft September fell full upon a gay party that tripped lightly over the velvet sward and through the shady trees near the banks of the Passaic river.

Never before had Maud Warrington looked so handsome. The want of animation which generally marred the effect of her beauty was now supplied; her eyes flashed with a new light, her cheeks glowed with unusual color, and her gayety was sparkling and fascinating; all this, combined with a faultless toilet, made Mr. Warrington prouder than ever of his beautiful young wife.

Irene looked lovely; her pure and earnest beauty being a restful contrast to the brilliance of her sister, and her simple girlish grace obtaining unsought the admiration which the other courted.

It was a gay party. Some of the ladies proposed a fishing pastime, but the gentlemen declared that luncheon should be first, and this being pleasantly agreed to, they returned to their carriages, which, although hired, were comfortable enough for once. They drove to a spot which Mrs. Warrington declared was the most retired and convenient, so the servants were set to work, and after a short time the rural repast, as her ladyship was pleased to call a most sumptuous banquet, was spread before her hungry guests.

After the rarest dainties of the season had been partaken of, and even the gentlemen felt that enough of sparkling Moselle was better than a feast of it, they followed the ladies; and, whether by design or not, Mrs. Warrington and Major Creswick strolled off together among the trees.

"Yes," said Major Creswick, resuming a conversation they had begun, while Maud's white fingers toyed with the luscious grapes she flung aside untasted; "I partly agree with you that flowers may be used as a language of the heart, but only when the lips have lost their eloquence, or perhaps where one is not certain of reciprocal affection; but that sort of thing is generally resorted to in coquetry. However, I do not agree with you that flowers should be preserved in the case you mentioned, for no man, unless he were a fool, could think it only carelessness on a lady's part if she threw away the flowers when withered that he had given her when blooming. Surely it would be absurd to preserve every bouquet he thinks fit to offer. In that case, a lady's rooms would soon be filled with dead leaves."

Mrs. Warrington shook her head incredulously, and looked down to a drooping rose fastened in her bosom by a diamond-studded brooch.

Francis Creswick flushed as he followed her gaze, for he recognized a flower he had laughingly presented her with on the previous evening. His eyes flew from it to her face; but no

trace of emotion revealed her meaning, and he thought her innocent of knowing what stem it was that lay beside the glittering ornament.

"It is a romantic principle to cherish a withered blossom because it was given by a particular person. I venture to say that Irene has never kept one of mine. That reminds me; she is fond of wild violets, and here is a bunch challenging me to cull them for her."

He stooped to gather the violets, but was arrested by the strange look of his companion.

A fierce fire burned in her eyes, and her lips were curved with a bitter smile.

"Stop!" she cried. "If she would prize them only for their bloom, it were a pity to disturb their living beauty!"

"She will like them for my sake as well," said he, breaking the stems and arranging them in a bouquet.

"Give them to me, Francis," cried Maud, as her hand rested upon his with a gentle pressure.

Astonishment held him powerless to resist, and he released them, murmuring in a reproachful tone:

"Mrs. Warrington!"

Her eyes met his. She was deadly pale, but no other sign indicated the venture she had made, and the overture of a proud woman to one she loved remained concealed beneath the guise of friendship.

"You have such a fondness for flowers," he said, "that you grudge them to one who perhaps does not value them so highly."

"You are satirical, Major Creswick."

She returned the bouquet, and Francis held it tremulously in his hand before he again spoke.

"If you wish this," holding it for her acceptance, "I can gather more for Irene."

She refused, and the young man, bowing to conceal his annoyance, added quietly:

"If agreeable to you, had we not better quicken our pace?"

"Yes, certainly; it was ridiculous of us to loiter here."

They hastened on without uttering another word until they stood on the bank of the river, Francis accusing his vanity for misconstruing the innocence of Mrs. Warrington; but happening to glance toward her, he acquitted himself, for there was an expression upon her fixed features that he was unwilling to interpret.

He was neither dull nor obtuse in matters of the heart; but he was taken by surprise when he saw her stoop to gather some wild blossoms in an agitated manner, quite out of keeping with the occasion.

"Look at these," she said, and her eyes flashed, although her face was white to ghastliness. "Do they not bear as soft an azure as the sky above us?—do they not plead with a gentle assurance of constancy? They are the forget-me-not."

"The sky changes; but these flowers, which grow uncultivated amid your purple heather, should be an emblem of woman's heart," he said, carelessly.

"Because they waste their sweetness on the desert air."

Francis laughed, for he was secretly amused at the childish and romantic tone of their conversation.

"And how often is the essence of a faithful love wafted near one who has but little care for it?" she added.

"Seldom, indeed. I almost fancy it is not in human nature to be completely indifferent to one who truly loves us. Does not the gayest belle censure the gentleman who bears to another shrine a heart she herself had rejected? If his attention were really indifferent to her, why should she notice this?"

"Perhaps from the vanity of our sex; but, unfortunately, the lords of creation take it as their prerogative—their right—"

She hesitated.

"Right to what?"

She did not answer for a moment, but looked with an expression that made his nerves tingle.

unpleasantly. Then she said: "To forget when it suits their purpose, and to crush the love of a true heart by coldness and deceit. Oh, Francis, why should the past be forgotten, when fond memory is the one light that illumines my solitary existence now?"

"Mrs. Warrington!"

He uttered her name more in amazement than reproach.

"Oh, torture me no more," she exclaimed, forgetting everything but the wild passion of her love. "Do you think that I forget the past? Tell me—tell me that one iota of its happiness is still remembered, and let me never look upon your face again!"

"Remembered! How could I forget it, when such a proof of its faith breathes in my present happiness? Is not Irene a living proof that I can never forget the past? And is not the kind devotion of Jasper Warrington sufficient to compensate for any brightness which may have been eclipsed in yours?"

"Eclipsed?"

"Yes, to use your own glowing terms, even as the fair star of morning grows dim by the rising sun, or as the cold beauty of Maud Emerson, which had once attracted Francis Creswick, paled before the warmer radiance of Irene, his betrothed wife."

White as death, and cowering with shame, she bent her head as she said:

"Then you never loved but her, and the past was only a dream that has converted my future life into misery? Yet I loved you—oh how I loved you, none but myself can know! Why should man have the privilege which is denied to woman? He may plead for love; but she is lost who condescends to do so. Yet it is more to her than it is to him, for it is her whole existence. Oh, Francis, cold as you have deemed me, what think you of me now? A woman condemned in her own sight, and despised in yours, where is my pride? You know all now."

She bowed her face in her hands, and shook with emotion. Francis Creswick stood for a second bewildered, his brave heart swelling with the pity of a true gentleman.

He took his hat from his head and threw it on the grass, as if by that simple action of respect he meant to soothe her.

"Maud," he said, and there was infinite tenderness in his voice, "I am not free from blame in the past you speak of. I was attracted by your beauty, and allowed my admiration to bring me to your side too often; but I never dreamed—I never could dream that you would cast a thought on one so entirely unworthy. I never thought of winning a place in the proud heart of one so beautiful, although my admiration was sincere, my respect unbounded; but I loved Irene, and no other could be to me what she is. My friendship and esteem are still true to Mrs. Warrington; and, could she forgive my past thoughtlessness, the events of the last hour shall be enshrined in my heart forever—shall be a sacred and silent memory."

"Thank you for this," she answered. "Blamable, vile, and unworthy as my conduct is, your generosity would almost make me forget it. Leave me now, for I am best alone."

He paused but for a second, while he asked, in a timid, faltering manner:

"Shall I send Irene to you?"

Maud looked at him as if not comprehending what he meant; he repeated his question, and she answered, with strange vehemence, "No!"

CHAPTER XV.

A SISTER'S CRIME.

"ALONE" by her own request, Maud looked the very picture of the little word; alone, in the inner world of her woman's life, from which she shut out all sympathy; alone, because in her self-assurance, she deemed her power absolute; alone, because the sweetest, best, and holiest treasures on earth were trampled on.

Alone! Irene knew it, felt it; for she had sad misgivings of her sister's moral strength since their father's death. Maud, missing the luxuries to which she was accustomed, took refuge in the family of Mr. Kirwan, then married Jasper Warrington. But in both instances Irene saw that her sister was not happy; and Irene, made wise by experience and following the promptings of her heart, broke upon her solitude with a playful caress.

"What is wrong, Maudy?" she asked, not daring to show too much anxiety. "Why are you in this lonely spot, like a forlorn maid of romance? Shall I gather you some of this lovely clematis? or shall we sit here like old cronies and talk?"

Mrs. Warrington looked at her sister as if she did not comprehend one word she said. Alone! Oh, surely not alone when that bright, loving soul was near to bear her company?

Was Maud so thoroughly incased in self-conceit that she could not realize the feelings which beamed upon her from the anxious looks of Irene? It seemed so, for she turned away and laughed.

"Fate has brought her here." Maud felt only those words beating into her brain, and so she laughed again as only a woman whose love is scorned can laugh before revenge is satisfied.

"Maudy, dear," murmured Irene, bending nearer to her, "shall we talk as we used to do long ago, or will you tell me what is troubling you?"

"Nothing is troubling me," Maud answered.

"It is so strange to see you here with only me, while so many people would be glad of a word or smile from you."

Maud smiled bitterly.

"Oh, no," she said; "you overrate my influence altogether. Where is Jasper?"

"Yonder, where we had luncheon; expecting you every moment, I fancy."

"What is Mrs. Huntley doing?"

"Beguiling the time with any young fop who comes within her reach; her husband thoroughly enjoying the game as usual."

"Where is Major Creswick?"

"Why, I made quite sure of finding him with you, Maudy, as I saw you pass through the trees together. I don't know where he is now, dear, unless he is smoking a cigar with Mr. Warrington."

"We will join them."

Mrs. Warrington walked forward. Irene followed, choking back the tears that fought for utterance, for surely tears can speak a language of their own.

"How lonely it is here!" she ventured to remark. "Is this the spot Mr. Warrington spoke of that made you faint the day you and he were here together, Maudy?"

"Yes; a few paces further on."

Irene, ignoring the short answer, looked up at the blue sky, while she shaded her eyes from the sun.

"I think," she said, laughing at her own conceit, "if I could envy anything, it would be the eagle's power of looking at that golden light."

She spoke cheerfully, but could not win the smile she sought. Maud was grave and preoccupied, but she stopped for her sister to come to her side; then they walked along together.

Only a few paces further, then Maud paused and caught Irene by the arm, looking wildly at her.

Was it really Maud's visage or a demon's that peered into her own? Those glowing eyes, those white, parched lips, seemed not to belong to the sister she loved.

Irene strove to speak. She was nearest the river. She felt herself pressed backward, and endeavored to keep her footing, but with a mighty effort, in which all her strength was used, Maud pushed her suddenly, and Irene was precipitated into the water.

Even then Irene's presence of mind did not desert her. She fought bravely against her terror, one idea uppermost—that Maud was

mad. She could swim well, and keeping herself afloat, she looked quickly toward the bank. Maud was lying flat upon it, and remembering even then the precaution the physicians had given against these fainting-fits, she screamed loudly.

Again and again that long sound of agony reverberated through the air. Oh, how lonely it seemed! Would no one come to save them both? Quick footsteps approached at last. She heard an exclamation of alarm, and knew that Francis Creswick leaped into the water. She felt his clutch, and Irene remembered no more until she found herself upon the bank, looking with horror on a paler face than her own, which lay quietly on Jasper Warrington's breast.

She asked what had happened; but before Francis could reply, she recollected all.

"My darling," he whispered, "you must go now with this good woman, who is waiting to take you to her cottage for dry clothes."

He made her swallow a few drops of brandy, placing himself so as to intercept the view of her sister.

"Maud has fainted; let me go to her," murmured Irene, trembling and anxious.

"You must go with this woman first. They have sent for a physician, and Maud will be all right presently."

"Why does Jasper look so frightened?"

"You know how he dreads to see her faint."

"Yes, yes; I know," answered Irene, putting him aside. "I know there must be danger. He was warned against this even in Washington. Oh, can it be possible that Maud is dead?"

"Hush!—have pity on that poor man, and think of yourself, for my sake!"

But Irene did not heed him. She rose and tottered to her sister's side.

How deathlike seemed those perfect features! Would those eyes, whose last look was so awful, never again open with a more tender light?—never again beam into hers with answering affection?

She called upon her name, entreating her to speak, but Maud was deaf to all entreaties, for Jasper had also called wildly and vainly.

The physician was not long in coming, although it seemed an age to the anxious throng gathered around the sisters.

It was an unusually long fainting-fit, but at length Maud revived, and was borne to the cottage where the good-natured country woman had almost forced Irene on the first sign of Maud's recovery, and where she now sat before a cheerful fire, dressed in a showy calico gown yards too wide for her, and her little feet thrust into slippers that would have been too big for Major Creswick himself.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

WEEKS passed, and Irene, nothing the worse of her ducking, went about happy and content in that big city house, her wedding-day approaching, and nothing in the world to trouble her except Maud's looks and manner.

Maud never appeared to her to be the same after that never-to-be-forgotten day at the falls. She was more haughty than ever, and seemed always to avoid being alone with her sister. Worse than this, she seemed to droop and fade despite the anxious love and care that surrounded her.

Once Irene remonstrated, but was met with such cold contempt that she burst into tears.

Then Maud was softened.

"You must never speak to me thus again," she said; "for although you mean kindly, Irene, I do not wish any one to interfere with what concerns me alone."

"But, Maudy, whatever touches you must reach those who love you," reassured poor Irene. "Indeed, it is very miserable to see you taking no interest in all your husband's devotion, and—and mine, and Francis's—"

"Your devotion!—Francis's!" Maud's laugh made her sister shrink and tremble. "He is

anxious for your marriage to be hurried on, is he not?"

"Yes, dear."

"Did he tell you the reason?"

"There is no reason, except that Mr. Warrington wants to take you abroad, and wishes to have the wedding here instead of in Chatham."

"No other reason?"

"No; there could be no other."

"He does not want to get you from under my protection?"

"No. Why should he? Oh, darling Maudy, do not think anything bad of Francis, who looks upon you as the very queen of women! Why should he want to get me away from you?"

"Because he doubts me, perhaps. But there, dear Irene, not another word! I am ill and weary. My head aches, and I am very cold."

It was not cold that made Irene shiver, but a dread of something wrong, as she drew a crimson shawl round Maud's shoulders and silently took a seat beside the window.

"You are willing to trust yourself to me?" resumed Mrs. Warrington after a short silence.

"Certainly, Maudy. It seems so queer for you to speak so to me!"

"Did Blanchard ever tell you anything about that day at Passaic river?"

"Blanchard?"

"Yes; Jasper's trusted servant."

Irene was alarmed. She thought Maud's mind must be wandering, and did not answer.

"Blanchard knew that I pushed you into the water on purpose—Hush, you need not look so startled, child. I offered Blanchard a bribe to give you Aladdin to ride in the park the first week of your visit here, but he would not do it. I always hated that man, and would not have taken him into my confidence but that nothing could be done in the stables without his consent. He knew I wanted Aladdin to kill you, as most assuredly he would have done!"

"Maud, Maud! you do not know the dreadful things you are saying!"

Miss Emerson hastened to the door for the purpose of calling Mr. Warrington, but Maud sprung forward and prevented her.

"I know quite well what I am saying," she continued, her hands restlessly tightening the shawl about her, "and you must listen. You say that Francis Creswick has no reason for hurrying on your marriage, but I know better; he is afraid that I should do you further harm." Maud paused, and went back to her couch. "But I think he may trust me now. I am dying, Irene. None can doubt that, at all events!"

"Maudy,"—Miss Emerson was kneeling before her sister, now clasping her hands, and looking at her searchingly—"I know you are very weak and ill, dear, but you are not dying; do not say that—do not think it!"

"I loved Francis Creswick from the beginning, and hated you because you were the chosen one!"

Irene leaped to her feet, her eyes flashing, and her breath coming quickly.

"It is false!" she said, in an agitated tone. "You do yourself a great injustice! It is too terrible to believe—it is impossible!"

She struggled for calmness, for she saw Maud lean back helplessly, her visage marble white, against the velvet couch, her lips purple, and drawn in with an expression of suffering.

Quick to act in emergency, Irene went to the mantle-piece, and laid her trembling fingers on the bell-handle, but Maud prevented her.

"Stop, I command you! What I want to tell let it be now, or it will not be at all. Oh, Iney! can you have compassion on me? I am very, very miserable!"

"Dear Maudy!" said Irene, now kneeling beside the couch, "lie back quietly and rest."

Mrs. Warrington looked wildly at her sister.

"Rest!" she repeated, with something of the same look that she had in Washington when

first she heard of Irene's betrothal to Francis Creswick; "I do not want rest; I want to tell you all the truth before it is too late!"

Too late! Irene clasped Maud to her heart and kissed her, and thus showed that she forgave, which was well, for Maud never spoke again.

Weeks went slowly by, and still she lay suffering patiently, never complaining, but dying, despite her husband's care and the skill of the best physicians. When it came to the last, she quietly moved her head nearer to Irene, who sat with fast-falling tears beside her pillow, and died!

Two winters came and went, and when the spring buds began to open again, and the birds to sing their glad song for approaching summer, the little Rectory in Chatham presented a most wonderful appearance, for it was thronged with guests.

It had been Irene's principal abode for those two years, for no entreaties could prevail on her to remain longer than a week at a time with either old Mr. Creswick or Jasper Warrington. Once or twice she broke her rule in favor of Grace, who was now the happy wife of that lover to whom her father always mysteriously alluded when he required an extra kiss, or wanted to admire her blushes; but now, as this bright summertime approached, the quiet Rectory was thrown into a state of excitement, while Mr. and Mrs. Veitcher bustled about in delighted anticipation of their daughter's wedding.

For Irene was the daughter of their love; and it must be confessed that they were not at all obliged to Major Francis Creswick for claiming his bride at their hands. However, Francis compromised the matter by promising sundry visits, and so they were tolerably content on this auspicious occasion, particularly when the guests, including old Mr. Creswick, who was young again in his son's happiness, were seated around the magnificent breakfast after the ceremony which made Irene and Francis one; and from the little church the wedding-bells rung out joyously.

THE END.

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